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# Coming of Age at Bullworth Academy: Bully and Narratives of Youth Violence

## Abstract

The 1999 rampage at Columbine High School, and the high-profile school shootings that preceded it, dramatically heightened pre-existing cultural anxieties about the consumption of violent media in childhood. In particular, videogames received unprecedented public scrutiny, and even now the spectre of Columbine continues to hang over any discussion of violent videogames. When Rockstar Games, developer of the ultraviolent *Grand Theft Auto* series, announced *Bully*, a similarly styled game that would take place in a school, controversy predictably ensued. Rockstar made no effort to dispel this controversy, and might have actually encouraged it, but the game itself bears little relation to an archetypal school shooting. As a text, *Bully* represents a much different narrative of adolescence, one that questions the morality of adult institutions and problematizes the very idea of "growing up." This essay compares and contrasts *Bully* with other narratives of youth violence, ranging from the popularly accepted telling of the Columbine shootings to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

## Keywords

School shooting, bullying, violent media consumption, videogames, youth violence, narrative, adolescence

"This is America. What we'll do is run in there, bribe and threaten people, and if that fails, we just beat the crap out of everyone." – Jimmy Hopkins, *Bully*

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School carrying two shotguns, a 9mm rifle, a TEC-9 automatic pistol, and several homemade bombs. The two gunmen then proceeded to murder twelve students and a teacher before shooting themselves. The Columbine shooting followed on the heels of several other high-profile rampages in American schools, and catalyzed the nation's growing anxieties about the causes of violent behavior in children. The debate over the proximate causes of the Columbine shootings touched on many of the most controversial issues in American political life: parenting, education, gun control, religion, media effects, and mental health issues. In the course of these debates, the shootings at Jonesboro, Paducah, Columbine, etc., were blended and solidified in the American consciousness into a kind of archetypal narrative. In this archetypal school shooting, a small number (generally one to two) of disaffected male adolescents resort to lethal violence against people they perceive as their persecutors, generally defined as other, more socially popular adolescents. It is fundamentally a revenge narrative: a well-intentioned but disproportionate response to an injustice. As memories of the shootings themselves have been colored by time, the Columbine massacre has become a piece of American folklore: not, strictly speaking, fictional, but bearing only a passing resemblance to the messy incongruity of historical fact. What remains is the archetype, a clean, marketable story based on understandable, if overly simplistic, human impulses.

With the shootings themselves so effectively collapsed into the archetype, the relationship between children and violent entertainment was similarly simplified. While several performers and texts from multiple media such as film, television and popular music came under intense scrutiny – most famously, Marilyn Manson and *The Matrix* – videogames bore the brunt of

the nation's newfound interest. Cultural critics such as David Grossman and Jack Thompson singled out videogames as uniquely damaging; not only could they make violence attractive while desensitizing children to its consequences, these critics claimed that videogames taught specific tactical skills and emotional responses. These critics argued that while film might encourage a child to kill, videogames would actually teach them how to kill more effectively and remorselessly.

While attempts to restrict the sale of violent videogames were largely unsuccessful in the U.S., a cloud of suspicion hung over the medium, and it was not uncommon for the spectre of Columbine to be raised in objection to any new game with particularly violent content. When Rockstar Games, the creators of the ultraviolent and highly successful *Grand Theft Auto* series, announced that their next game would take place in a school and be called *Bully,* the popular assumption—based on the title as much as the company's reputation from *Grand Theft Auto*—was that *Bully* would be an interactive recreation of the archetypal school shooting. Jack Thompson, in particular, took care to make the connection explicit. In a fax written to the CEO of Take-Two Interactive (the game's publisher) shortly before the game's release, Thompson wrote: "'I and others are today calling on you to STOP the release of Bully. Columbine changed the face of America, but you are about to come out with a game that celebrates, glamorizes, and trains kids to do what Klebold and Harris did. Are you nuts?'" (Cole, 2005, para. 2).

In the political context of post-Columbine America, *Bully* is clearly a provocative title, and one that calls to mind several aspects of the archetypal school shooting, although a cursory examination of the relationship between bullying and school shootings raises some confusion. The unitary "Bully" of the title seems to imply that the player is a bully; after all, if there were a put-upon child seeking revenge in the form of mass murder, the archetype would demand more than one persecutor. If the player were the titular bully, however, mass murder becomes an unlikely scenario. The archetypal school shooter is a victim of bullying, but not a bully himself. He is, rather, a murderer, and murder is not generally considered to be within the purview of bullying.

Despite the problematic title, Rockstar did little to discourage these associations. Indeed, some have suggested that it actively encouraged them for publicity. Political blogger Amanda Marcotte wrote:

> In the past [...] the people whose work was being exploited would fight back. The politicians actually felt they had to censor and supress [sic] the music they were making hay about, and this was rightly perceived by the artists as an attack. What appears to have changed is that Rockstar realized that rilling [sic] up the would-be censors could be used as a viral marketing campaign, and get them all sorts of free publicity. This game appears to be designed to get the politicians and parents to flip shit, just by the name "Bully." (2006, para. 7).

She went on to suggest that the game might actually have functioned as "something of a mockery of the tedious controversy" (2006, para. 8) that would inevitably follow the release of a game with such a provocative title.

However, there were reasons to suspect that *Bully* would be a schoolyard bloodbath beyond the title and Rockstar's previous work on *Grand Theft Auto.* The games share much in terms of how gameplay functions and what the player can do – in short, during gameplay, *Bully* "feels" quite a bit like *Grand Theft Auto. Bully*'s uses a type of engine that was popularized by what I will refer to as "*GTA* games," including *Grand Theft Auto 3, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Saint's Row,* and *The Godfather.*[1] At the narrative level, however, *Bully* is quite different from "*GTA* games." While the "*GTA* games" are populated entirely by adults, take place in sprawling, dystopian cityscapes, and allow the player to kill untold numbers of anonymous, infinitely replaceable non-player characters (NPCs), in *Bully,* the cast of characters is mainly comprised of children, the story concerns events taking place at a boarding school, and – most importantly – nobody dies.

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[1] I include *Saint's Row* and *The Godfather* among the "*GTA* games" due to similar gameplay, but Rockstar did not develop them, and they are not in any official way connected to the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise.

*Bully* and *Grand Theft Auto* thus have much in common, despite being very different. To explain this sort of disparity, film and television theorists Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2002), writing on the similarities and differences between film and videogames, proposed a four-part taxonomy of videogames: platform, genre, mode, and milieu (p.26-27). Platform is irrelevant to the topic at hand, as it concerns the hardware on which the game is played: in *Bully'*s case, a PlayStation 2 console or emulator. Genre is used quite differently than it is in relation to film, denoting what actions the player/avatar will generally be called upon to perform, such as driving, fighting, solving puzzles, etc. In *Bully* and the "*GTA* games," the genre in question is so heavily hybridized that no single-word classification seems appropriate, but the vaguely named "adventure" genre will suffice. Mode refers to how the player experiences the game, marking distinctions such as first/third-person perspective or number of players. Both *Bully* and the "*GTA* games" are single-player game played from a variety of first- and third-person perspectives. Finally, a game's milieu functions much as a film's "genre," describing the narrative in general terms.

*Bully* and the "*GTA* games" share a genre and a mode, but differ radically in their milieux. This shared genre/mode allows for tremendously wide-ranging gameplay, in which players can traverse large, densely populated environments on foot or by vehicle, initiate scripted conversations with NPCs, or fight said NPCs with varying weaponry and varying levels of lethality. Though this genre and mode have been memorably employed in many games about criminal activity in urban areas, there is no technical reason why this engine is exclusively suited to drive-by shootings and carjackings. Many milieux have now been enacted in similar engines, from the sword-and-sorcery worlds of *The Legend of Zelda* to the cartoonish antics of *The Simpsons.*

While it is common enough, even among videogame academics, to treat story and gameplay as two unrelated elements – as is implied by the distinction between genre and milieu – in practice, each tends to affect the other. The milieu of the boarding school affects the actions available to the protagonist, Jimmy Hopkins, and by extension, the player. The killing sprees of "*GTA* games" are impossible in Bully, and at the end of the game the body count stands at exactly zero. With rare exceptions, none of Bullworth's students are in life-threatening danger. Because the students have unique names and faces, they could not be replaced were the designers to allow them to be killed. In place of the wanton killing found in the *"GTA* games," the violence that dominates Bullworth's students' lives is of a more pedestrian variety: harassment, humiliation, intimidation, and physical violence generally intended for those purposes. In short, bullying.

*Bully* is neither *Grand Theft Auto* in a schoolyard, nor is it a videogame adaptation of the Columbine massacre, nor is it a cynical attempt to cash-in on moral panic about videogames and youth violence. Rather, *Bully* is a story in and of itself, a story that is fundamentally about the relationships between children and power, and like most examinations of power, it is nuanced and unsettling. Although the controversy over *Bully* had mostly dissipated by the time the game was released, the content of the game itself would very likely have raised its own share of media attention even if it had been released by an unknown company with a less provocative title. Media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) notes that moral complexity tends to be more controversial than violence itself:

> When culture warriors and media reformers cite examples of violent entertainment, they are almost always drawn to works that are explicitly struggling with the meaning of violence, works that have won critical acclaim or cult status in part because they break with the formulas through which our culture normally employs violence. They rarely cite banal, formulaic, or aesthetically uninteresting works, though such works abound in the marketplace. It is as if the reformers are responding to the work's own invitations to struggle with the costs and consequences of violence, yet their literal-minded critiques suggest an unwillingness to deal with those works with any degree of nuance. (p. 216)

Bully is a work that demands to be dealt with on its own terms, as its treatment of bullying is not a simple one. In the game's dialogue, the term "bully" is variously applied to many different characters, including Jimmy, but the title ultimately refers to neither the protagonist nor any of his human antagonists. More likely, it refers to the school itself: Bullworth Academy, an ignoble institution that bears the motto "Canis Canem Edit," or "Dog Eat Dog."[2]

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[2] In Europe, *Bully* was released under the title *Canis Canem Edit.*

Staffed by sadists, incompetents and perverts, Bullworth represents both a parody of the stated aims of modern education and "a microcosm for the whole world" (Bully instruction manual, p. 14). Concerning the growth of the "school story" as a literary genre, it has been noted that the literary function of school has changed along with the real-world understanding of what schools are and what they do, and the boarding school is of particular interest: "As a protected sanctuary for aristocratic values, the boarding school is a setting distinctly separate from the real world, bearing the potential for the creation of a utopian community of child equals and the illusion of a classless society" (Grigsby, 2007, p. 32). In Bully, however, the illusion is a very thin one, and there is no ambiguity about what aristocratic values are being upheld: the students from the richest families have their own dormitory, far larger, cleaner, and in better condition than the boys' dorm in which most of the male students live. The math teacher sells tests to students who can afford to pay for them. The gym teacher pays the protagonist to steal underwear from the girls' dorm, the English teacher pays Jimmy to conceal his alcoholism from the administration, and the art teacher pays Jimmy to break that English teacher out of an asylum.

With these adults to look after them, the behavior of the students is unsurprising. The youth of the campus and surrounding town is divided into cliques: the "bullies," a small clique of sadists; the "nerds," smart but socially inept kids who live in fear of anyone physically stronger than themselves; the "preppies," kids from wealthy families who value breeding and family connections above all else; the "greasers," rebellious kids from the wrong side of town locked in a constant feud with the preppies; the "jocks," stereotypical dumb athletes with a special hatred for nerds, and the "townies," an off-campus clique that hates all Bullworth students equally. These cliques continually feud with Jimmy and with each other. The authorities, to the extent they wish to stop this behavior, are ineffective in doing so. Violence against other students is, of course, forbidden, as are dress code violations, curfew violations, vandalism, etc., and the school's prefects will happily chase and tackle to the ground any student they witness violating any of these rules. However, players can quickly learn to avoid the prefects, and even if they are caught, the punishments are only short-term inconveniences – players are dragged to the principal's office, have their possessions confiscated, and might be forced to perform some menial chore for a short period of time. Every "bad" action is weighted by the game, and some transgressions are worse than others, but the player must constantly break rules to correct the myriad injustices that surround Jimmy.

Which is not to say that players will spend every minute of gameplay in some manner of transgression. *Bully* is a game about school, after all, and if players are so inclined, Jimmy can go to class. There are six classes in *Bully,* and each gives Jimmy certain tools to more easily reach his goals. Chemistry allows Jimmy to make stinkbombs and firecrackers in his room; English improves his ability to talk his way out of trouble; Art improves his ability to kiss girls (which provides a health bonus); Gym makes him a more effective fighter; Shop gives him access to bicycles for quicker transportation, and Photography opens a wealth of optional game content. The classes themselves are presented to the player in the form of mini-games that are generally unrelated to the subject matter, and the rewards are rather non-intuitive, with Art being the most obviously nonsensical. Although going to class is sometimes treated a punishment – prefects will escort Jimmy to the appropriate classroom if they catch him breaking a rule during class periods – it is otherwise voluntary, and unquestionably beneficial to the player. Nonetheless, players can avoid as many classes as they like, should they so choose. Jimmy's academic prowess is firmly in the hands of the player, and the story proceeds regardless of his commitment or lack thereof.

That story is divided into five chapters, each of which can be roughly described in terms of which cliques Jimmy is set against. Generally, Jimmy spends much of the chapter working for one clique against another, earning the first clique's appreciation through his aid and the second clique's respect through violent domination in the chapter finale. In Chapter I, Jimmy fights against the bullies on his own behalf; in Chapter II, he fights against the preps on behalf of the poorer students; in Chapter III, he fights against the greasers on behalf of the

preps; in Chapter IV, he fights against the jocks on behalf of the nerds; in Chapter V, the school descends into sheer anarchy and he fights everyone to restore order.

Although usually not in such a state of violent chaos, Bullworth Academy is always a busy place. Unlike most of the "*GTA* games," which fill crowds with anonymous, replaceable NPCs, every student and teacher at Bullworth is a unique character. There are 61 students at Bullworth, only 18 of which are not coded as belonging to one of the cliques. Among the unaffiliated are the three most central to the game's story: Jimmy, Petey and Gary.

Jimmy and Gary are depicted as two sides of the same coin, liminal figures not directly connected to any one clique, but conditionally connected to all of them. For reasons of greed, self-defense, or a desire for order, Jimmy works strategically with every clique to achieve a favorable balance of power that dilutes the cliques' desire to feud with one another. Gary, who shows symptoms of paranoia and goes off his medication at the end of Chapter I, uses gossip and subterfuge to *create* violence: in Chapter I, he arranges for the unsuspecting Jimmy to be ambushed by bullies (who believe Jimmy has been spreading rumors about them, thanks to Gary), and in Chapter V, he enters into an alliance with a group of Bullworth dropouts to start an all-out war between Bullworth's factions, to annihilate Jimmy's power base (the students) and solidify his own (the principal). Petey lacks even such tenuous connection with the cliques – even the nerds won't hang out with him – and clings to whoever will (nominally) be his friend. At first this is Gary, who abuses him verbally and physically; with Gary's departure at the conclusion of Chapter I, Petey latches onto Jimmy. While Jimmy is less openly antagonistic, he is slow to appreciate Petey as a friend, even as he increasingly relies on him for his own purposes. Jimmy is fairly smart, somewhat athletic, and tough as nails, but he operates mostly by instruction and instinct, whereas Petey is a strategist. Jimmy knows how to start fights, but Petey teaches him how to end them. Petey is not a peacemaker, of course, as there are no peacemakers at Bullworth. Rather, Petey has a knack for figuring out exactly what kind of humiliating public domination will destroy a clique's desire to keep fighting.

In the game's final conflict, the school has erupted into an all-out riot, with students of all cliques openly brawling with each other in every part of campus. The greasers seize control of the girls' dorm, while the nerds break into the gym and dance around a pile of burning sports equipment. Gary's scheming has created a Hobbesian war of all against all, culminating in his attempt to kill Jimmy. It is an emotional and dramatic scene, but one that bears little obvious resemblance to the archetypal school shooting. Instead, it calls to mind a different, more primal tale of youth violence: *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, [1954]).

*Lord of the Flies* presents the reader with a society constructed by boys, populated by boys, according to their ideas of what constitutes manhood. Ralph, the would-be politician, calls for the children to work together under a common cause: a return to civilization off the island, and some modicum of civilization on it. Jack, the would-be warrior, offers a different choice, a life of glory and violence. For a time, the boys are content to fight the elements for their survival; as rumors of the Beast spread upward from the younger to the older boys, they fight their imaginations; finally, as Jack's tribal, militarist vision begins to overwhelm Ralph's fragile democracy, they fight each other. By the end, the island is in flames, as Jack's tribe ruthlessly hunts for Ralph, the last remaining outsider.

Gary certainly bears some resemblance to Jack, most notably in his obvious lust for power. They are also both fond of warlike pageantry: Jack's war paint is hardly more bestial than the Nazi SS uniform Gary wears for Halloween. Similarly, Jack comes to power amid superstitious fear of a literal, physical Beast, and Gary, too, uses rumor and paranoia to gain power over others – first, by telling the bullies and the preppies that Jimmy has been spreading lies about them, and then by having the townies trick the student cliques into going to war with one another. Paranoia is both Gary's greatest weapon and his defining characteristic. His initial justification for plotting against Jimmy is that Jimmy was clearly plotting against *him.*

Jimmy shares Ralph's basic desire for order, but little else. He is a poor politician, and despite occasionally being able to talk his way out of trouble (if the player has taken him to English class), he solves most of his problems with his fists. He is no fan of authority in general, despite his eventual acceptance of that role, and unlike Ralph, does not long for adult intervention to set things right. For this is the most salient difference between Bullworth

and the unnamed island: Bullworth *is* civilization. There are adults all around, and *they behave as selfishly and cruelly as the children.* In *Lord of the Flies,* Simon is the first to realize that the Beast they must fear is the evil inside all human beings. This fact would not be news to any student of Bullworth Academy. Even the intellectuals, represented in *Lord of the Flies* by the timid, doomed Piggy, have their own cruel lust for power: the nerds have built a fortress of their own, defended by a mounted machinegun that fires potatoes. Inside the fortified walls of this base, their leader stands on a balcony beneath a flag whose design bears some resemblance to a swastika, delivering rousing speeches about subjugating his inferiors.

At the end of the game, a kind of peace is won, but a peace that promises to be fragile, and will presumably be held in place only by the continued threat of violence by Jimmy, whose one shining moral characteristic is the belief that, while hurting people is sometimes fun, some people deserve to be hurt more than others. It is, of course, not irrelevant that the events of Bully play out without a single human being dying. The controversy surrounding the game's release under the shadow of Columbine makes it equally notable that none of the students seem to have access to actual firearms. While including firearms would no doubt have made the game more controversial, it's unclear whether that would have presented a problem for the developer or publisher. More importantly, there is no *diegetic* reason to suspect that some of these kids, who come from a wide range of income brackets and live under systemic abuse and humiliation, would find ways to sneak some guns into their dorm rooms. Perhaps Bully really does take place in a kinder, gentler world, one in which even the worst excesses of human nature do not naturally lead to murder. Perhaps the exigencies of gameplay or politics encouraged a certain timidity on the part of designers, but if so, how does that affect our reading of the game? Should we borrow a page from the literary school of New Criticism, and attempt to read the text without any attention to the political and historical context of its design? In other words, is Columbine inherently part of *Bully'*s story? Ultimately, it depends on the reader, or in this case, the player.

Many people who play *Bully* will ignore the storyline completely, or give it only the most cursory thought. Others will no doubt come to wildly different conclusions concerning the character of Jimmy and the game's overall perspective on human nature than I have. This is to be expected, and is part of what makes videogames such an evocative medium. The player's conception of Jimmy is determined not only by his dialogue, scripted interactions with others, and the actions he *must* perform in order to play the game to completion, but also by the actions he performs that are not directly related to the story written by the designers. In *Bully,* players are constantly invited to go "off the path," and explore an open-ended world with few rigidly defined rules or goals, and all of these actions contribute to the player's understanding of the protagonist and the story in general. As the player moves further away from the story explicitly written by the designers, the player's own pre-conceptions about the meaning of Jimmy's actions take on an increasingly major role. Ultimately, it is difficult (at least for American audiences) to think of *Bully* without thinking of school shootings, because our ideas about school shootings are now inextricably entwined with our ideas about children, power, and morality. *Bully* does not offer a cohesive theory as to why kids would want to hurt or kill each other, nor does it mentally or physically train them to commit mass murder. What it does do is give players a place to reexamine their beliefs about youth violence, in a fictional world that is far more complex – and, in many ways, more realistic – than that of the archetypal school shooting.

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