

# Fast Paced and Action Packed: The Temporality of Masculinity in Shooter Videogames

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## **INTRODUCTION**

First- and third-person shooter videogames are frequently linked to men and masculinities—in terms of characters, thematic content, players and cultural expectations (e.g. Hopp and Fisher 2017; Kontour 2011; Kontour 2012; Ohl and Duncan 2012; Paaßen et al. 2017, 425; Tompkins 2017). Plenty of research has unpacked the nature of this constructed relationship and its parallels in film and other media, where there is an emphasis on explicating the tenets of certain idealised (military) masculinities that tend to be portrayed, embodied and performed through this genre of videogame. One such tenet that arises, for the first-person shooter especially, is that of speed: when describing a videogame or character’s machismo, the action is typically framed as fast paced as though that has a direct bearing on masculinity. Fullerton et al. (2008), for example, argue that first-person shooters “conceive of moving through space in a distinctly masculine fashion” (para. 7) that the authors then relate to the quick reflexes and real-time problem solving the genre often demands of its players. But although this discourse is mobilised as an obvious interpretation of that masculinity in action, there is surprisingly little attention given to how or why pacing—so central to the shooter genre (Ramsay 2015, 105) and its cinematic counterparts (Donovan 2010)—relates to and supposedly illustrates manliness.

This paper explores that truism and asks whether speed itself is somehow masculine in shooter videogames. In drawing on my doctoral work, I look to both academic literature and the news conversation around key shooter series (of which Call of Duty is my primary focus) to understand how this discursive framing operates. Although this research is ongoing, I tentatively conclude in this genre context that, rather than stand on its own, pacing serves to intensify and amplify other traits associated more closely with a range of masculinities. That is to say that, despite the ubiquity of the above frame in which fast speeds are related to “testosterone-fuelled” action, pacing of both a slow and fast nature are ultimately seen as a qualifier of different conceptualisations of military masculinities. In the occasional instances where slow pacing is treated as gendered, combat expertise is interpreted through this lens as facilitating a stoic, methodical, reserved and more precise approach to shooter videogame scenarios—one that is, essentially, so confident in its masculinity it need not be rushed. Almost contradictorily, faster pacing is read as a testament to one’s physical prowess and instinctive expertise not requiring time to think. Neither is exactly more or less masculine than the other.

Evidently, such descriptors of temporality in conjunction with masculinity in cultural conversations about shooter videogames do not mean pacing is necessarily gendered.

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Rather, speed interacts with gendered markers in the genre to provide heightened evidence for a range of masculinities and, to a lesser extent, femininities. Indeed, a similar spectrum of temporality can be observed regarding the in-game depictions of female characters and their more contested approaches to femininity, with *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016) perhaps best demonstrating how pacing and movement varies for female characters to amplify the gendered traits that define them. Although there is some research that supports a reading of speed as linked to certain normative masculinities, with Ruberg's (2020) reflections on speedrunning and linearity being a persuasive example, I ultimately find this association is taken at face value in news and some academic literature about the shooter genre when speed alone says little about a videogame's machismo.

## BIO

Erin Maclean is a PhD candidate and tutor based at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. She is interested in intersections between popular culture, journalism and social issues. Her thesis focuses on the tensions that arise in the news and gaming communities as popular shooter videogames evolve in the way they represent gender.

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