

Horror of massacre streamed to 'lads'



The worst mass shooting in New Zealand's history is also being livestreamed, a grotesque, next-step evolution of our digital obsession.

Chip Le Grand, Victorian Chief Reporter, 12:00AM March 16, 2019

If you poured all the hate in the world into a first-person video game, set against the desperate cries of real people dying and the cold narration of a gunman deaf to their pleas, this is what it would look and sound like.

We see them on the screen, 20 bodies or more, lifeless in the corner of a Christchurch prayer room. He casually approaches, knowing they are beyond running away or fighting back, and fires more bullets into each one.

Two of the dead are young children, both boys, huddling together on a couch. One boy has his mouth open. We'll never know what life they might have led.

He walks across the green carpet of the prayer room to the opposite corner, to another tangle of the dying and dead. There are perhaps 10 or more but he isn't counting. He shoots into them, into their flesh, until he is certain no one can still be breathing.

No one is.

Five minutes after he starts shooting, he is the only person still alive inside the Al Noor mosque. He has run out of people to kill.

It begins in a car, a Subaru wagon. We are driving through the streets of Christchurch, in the viewfinder of a man dressed in battle fatigues and carrying an armoury of military-style rifles. "Remember lads," he tells us. "Subscribe to PewDiePie." It is the name of a Swedish YouTuber, a gamer who livestreams to a massive global audience while he kills zombies and monstrous enemies.

The worst mass shooting in New Zealand's history is also being livestreamed, a grotesque, next-step evolution of our digital obsession. The drive is set to a seemingly incongruous soundtrack, a jaunty European folk song. Beneath the melody, there is a sinister message. The song was written to celebrate Serbia's war against Bosnia and the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the Balkans. To anyone familiar with it, the aim of this evil game is clear.

We see his face just once, when he takes off his helmet and flips the GoPro camera around. His name is Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old Australian who has been living in Christchurch, planning his attack on the mosque, for three months. He has pale skin, short brown hair and light eyes.

"Righto lads. Another couple of minutes," he tells us.

He is wearing protective knee pads and gloves. A yellow, pine-scented air freshener dangles from the rear-view mirror.

The music shifts to the flute and snare of the British Grenadiers, the marching tune used by the British redcoats against America's revolutionaries. He is going to war against an enemy unarmed and unaware.

He is walking from the car down the footpath and across the cement parking lot at the front of the mosque. He is carrying a shotgun but the man who greets him in the doorway either doesn't see the weapon or doesn't understand in time. "Hello brother," the man calls. He doesn't answer. His response is nine shots in rapid succession. The man is dead before the gunman crosses the threshold. Another tries to run but he guns him down, dropping the empty shotgun and switching to semi-automatic rifle.

We are now in the main prayer room.

He has timed his attack with Friday afternoon prayer, the busiest prayer time in the Muslim week. He stands in the middle of the room, emptying one clip

after another into the terrified mass of people, trapped in the far corners of the room. The music has stopped. The only sound is the rat-a-tat of gunfire, the only interruption the changing of clips. A place of god, of community and worship, is a slaughterhouse. His regret is that some get away.

“There wasn’t even time to aim given there were so many targets,” he later tells us in a morbid debrief. “There were so many people. “A lot of them survived, unfortunately. They all ran pretty quickly. “I left one full magazine back there, I know for sure. Possibly more. I had to run along, in the middle of the firefight, and pick up the mag that fell out.”

A “firefight”, he calls it. This is his imagining of a glorious battle. Boys and old men sheltering in a corner from a heavily armed assailant. Worshippers in blue jeans and traditional dress, climbing over one another, clawing at closed windows, in the panicked final moments of their lives.

He believes he is someone, fighting for something. On the barrel of one of his guns, he has scrawled a message: “This is for Ebba Akerlund.” Ebba Akerlund was a Swedish schoolgirl killed two years ago when an Uzbek migrant stole a truck and ploughed it into pedestrians at a Stockholm shopping centre. She was 11 years old, the youngest of five victims of a horrific terror attack. She was as defenceless as the worshippers now laying dead inside the Christchurch mosque.

He takes us outside the mosque, walking with quick steps. In the afternoon sunlight, he can see a woman across the yard, shoes in hand, trying to escape through a side gate. He hasn’t killed a woman yet. All the people inside the mosque were men. He shoots. She is hit but disappears from view. He runs through the front gate and finds her, no more than 15m away, lying on the pavement. He shoots again. And again. He steals a look back down the street to make sure no one is coming. He turns and walks purposely towards the woman. “Help me,” she cries. “Help me.” She has rolled into the gutter, lying facedown on the bitumen. She can hear his footsteps but cannot see his face. Her shoes sit abandoned on the pavement. They are fashionable trainers, the shoes of a young woman. “Help me,” she cries. “Help me.” He shoots her in the back of the head. From point-blank range, he shoots her twice.

In the days to come, we’ll know her name, who she was, who loved her. On the screen, she is just one more dead. Two little pops. The woman dies metres from where he parked the Subaru. Its tailgate is open. Its boot is loaded with

red plastic jerry cans of petrol. For every life he has taken, for all those he will ruin, he hasn't done everything he came to do.

The soundtrack shifts again. We hear the opening lyric of The Prodigy song, Hellfire: "I am the god of hellfire, and I bring you, fire." We are driving again. Faster than before. He talks, like a wired teenager on Xbox, about what we've just seen. He's eager to play again. He wants to keep killing.

The Christchurch streets blur past. The words leach through the screen like poison.

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