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Thinking outside the ‘murder box’: virtual violence and pro-social action in video games

Dr Jack Denham & Dr Matthew Spokes

Abstract

The ‘murder box’ is a virtual, lawless space where anything goes. When debauched and hedonistic experiences are combed-out of our everyday lives as society ascends a gradual arc of civility (Elias 1994), voyeuristic, pleasure-seekers can live out their violent, sadistic fantasies (Atkinson and Rodgers 2016). Atkinson and Rodgers apply this popular criminological metanarrative, rooted in Freud (1973), Elias (1994) and Presdee (2000), to violence in gaming. In the context of their game of choice (*Grand Theft Auto V*), we empirically test the idea that given limitless avenues for violence, people will necessarily act out violent desires. We find that player choices are mixed, considered, and vary wildly from untamed subjective violence, to more pro-social behaviours. Our contribution is to argue for a more measured understanding of player-game interaction that accounts for the broader spectrum of Elias’ work, including those internalised self-controls directing individuals away from hedonistic decisions. At the same time, this contribution should be read as a response to the often absolutist theoretical positions adopted in cultural criminology more broadly that require closer empirical scrutiny.

Keywords: murder box, deviant leisure, video games, violence, cultural criminology

Introduction

In this paper, our objective is to empirically test Atkinson and Rodgers’ (2016) argument – developed from Presdee’s ‘carnival of crime’ (2000) – that games offer a zone of exception in which violent desires can be acted out. Using the popular video game *Grand Theft Auto V* (henceforth *GTAV*), we find some support for the notion that the popularity of violent gaming is borne out of a want to experience visceral, transgressive encounters that are prohibited, or unacceptable, in the outside world. But given the number of instances in which participants opted for nonviolent encounters, we argue for a more measured approach to understanding simulated violence that accounts for this variety and the multifarious player-game choices that can be made.

The crux of Atkinson and Rodgers’ argument (2016; see also Rodgers 2014) is that people, when given open and un-policed spaces in video games, will act out innate desires from the core of their personality, and that the increase in popularity of games that facilitate this behaviour is broadly reflective of a general dissatisfaction with everyday life. Moreover, this dissatisfaction is at risk of snowballing as those who play become desensitised to violence, what Ferrell et al (2008) term ‘cultural normalization’. This approach in cultural criminology is perhaps best articulated in Presdee’s (2000) work on

‘carnavalesque’ spaces – that ‘represent the deepening presence of sadistic voyeurism into daily social life’ (Atkinson and Rodgers 2016:1292). Alongside this, the authors draw on the work of Norbert Elias:

[A] permanent, apparently groundless inner unrest shows how many drive energies are dammed up in a form that permits no real satisfaction (1939/1994:376).

As society has become civilised with decreased violent experiences, building on Freud (1973), Elias theorises an inner unrest and lack of satisfaction from the repression of primal human desires. With Dunning (1939/1993), he points his theory towards sport, arguing that play is a release of these desires and a ‘quest for excitement’. As a development, Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) redeploy this work towards video games.

To understand why our participants engaged in pro-social behaviour and consumption alongside, or instead of, violence, we work backwards through the lineage of this popular criminological metanarrative, from Presdee (2000) – through Elias’ civilising process – all the way back to its Freudian (1973) roots. We draw out nuances in Elias’ work that show civilising forces as internalised, not ‘brought about rationally’ (365), but instead existing in a sort of subconscious as external factors have been ‘converted into self-restraints’ (365). Instead of pure, unchecked violence – what we have witnessed in this dataset are these self-restraints, where ‘innumerable’ rules and prohibitions appear to have been internalised to the extent that, even with limitless opportunity for simulated violence, participants routinely aligned themselves towards more pro-social, or ‘civilised’ activities. Instead of unchecked, merciless violence we present data suggesting that the murder box is meted by a complex and varying set of individual player choices that waver *between* violence and more pro-social aspects such as working, obeying the rules of the road, or consuming.

As a response to Atkinson and Rodgers (2016), our contribution is to highlight the multifarious ways people exploit the ‘openness’ of open-world games and to account for instances of law-abidingness, conformity and self-control in our sample. But this paper should be read more broadly as a response to this developing metanarrative in cultural criminology – usually based in Presdee’s (2000) ‘carnival’ argument – that positions crime as a deep internalised desire, and forms of violent popular culture as exploiting this desire through marketisation. To that end, we warn against the assumption that all encounters with lawless image-spaces (Hayward 2012) are necessarily violent or sexually exploitative.

This paper begins by situating this existing cultural-criminological work within contemporary video games research that has considered violence as an element, but not necessarily as a principal, of gameplay. After discussion of our methodology, which employs fifteen semi-structured interviews, we present some data in support of the ‘murder box’ (2016) as all participants at some point opted to exploit lawless, ‘unchecked encounters’ towards violence offered by ‘cultural zones of exception’. We will then offer our counter

narrative, detailing the ways in which participants shied away from violence, or towards traditional frameworks of consumption, demonstrating that a more measured criminology of video gaming is necessary, and that one prefaced entirely on violence obscures a rounded understanding of the sorts of social practices and processes at play when we 'play'.

Literature Review

Smith and Raymen (2018) have called for social research to consider our contemporary culture of leisure and the deviant consequences it fosters. Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) have been doing this work by exploring narratives of violence actively consumed through pornography and video games. They argue that a tightening of acceptable behaviour (Hayward 2012), alongside declining real-world violence, manifests in a growth of pathological, violent, and violently sexual experiences inside what they term 'murder boxes' – virtual, lawless spaces of play; cultural 'zones of exception' where people can enact their sadistic desires. To this we can also add Hayward's (2012:455) five emergent spaces of interest for cultural criminologists, one of them being 'virtual' space, which demonstrates that there is utility in considering video games in relation to zemiology.

Hayward also tells us that 'while the everyday experience of life in contemporary Western society may or may not be suffused with crime, it is most certainly suffused with images and increasingly images of crime' (2010:1). It has become clear that growing cultures of video gaming are contributing to this trend reinforcing Hayward's (2012) argument that deviance is increasingly a pillar of economic and leisure activities. Referring to these images of crime, Phillips and Strobl (2016:307) suggest forms of media are places where the 'meaning of crime [...] is created, consumed and re-created'. Video games are one of the world's largest cultural industries (Donovan 2010), with *GTAV* becoming the highest grossing media product of all time in early 2018 (Donnelly 2018). That these forms of media have, financially, surpassed any film ever made (McGonagle 2018) cannot be overlooked as foundational crime-image-spaces that need criminological attention. This need is further reinforced by Ferrell et al (2008) who argue that in order to develop a fully-functioning cultural criminology, issues of symbolic violence and sadistic voyeurism in media and culture, and their normalizing affects, must be included.

This popular criminological metanarrative of tamed and neutered lives feeding sadistic cultural experiences becomes complicated when we begin to think about games, rubbing up against a games-studies counternarrative that sees play as inherently pro-social. As Huizinga contends, 'culture arises in the form of play, it is played from the very beginning' (1949:46). Building on this, as Grey (2009:1) tells us, games can and should 'be read critically, not simply as expressions of culture or as products of consumption, but as objects through which we can *think*'. How then might we think about *GTAV* as a zone of exception, as a prism through which the potentialities of subjective violence and pro-sociality are embodied simultaneously and enacted by players?

Whilst it is clearly the case that not all games involve violence – *Candy Crush Saga*, one of the most popular games of all time with 2.73 billion downloads to its name

(Takahashi 2017), involves rotating sweets over and over again – many of the bestselling titles of recent years have violence as a central gameplay feature. According to Forbes magazine (Kain 2017), of the top ten bestselling games of 2017 only two – *NBA 2K18* and *Madden NFL 18* – had no violent aspect to their gameplay. Other titles in the list featuring recreated historical conflicts (*Call of Duty WWII*; *For Honor*), super-hero street fighting (*Injustice 2*), player-versus-player death matches on alien worlds (*Destiny 2*) alongside carjacking, prostitution and bank heists (*GTAV*). This suggests that for a sizeable proportion of players, the act of play involves engaging with simulated violence, be that through subjective encounters within the game world or through broader systemic violence engendered by the design process (to progress, you must kill); as Pearce and Artemesia (2009:17) argue, echoing Smith et al's (2003) work on the presence, frequency and representation of violence, there are numerous world types within games, and each world has different conventions so the types of violence available are staggering. Coupled with other forms of popular culture also touched on by Atkinson and Rodgers (2016), video games can be seen as part of a spectrum in which violence – both structural and subjective – interpenetrates cultural engagement more widely.

This underlines the fact that violence in video games, as King and Krzywinska suggest, is ubiquitous (2006:62). Players want to experience a variety of hypothetical sensations through their gaming, and the intensity that violence facilitates, especially in relation to preserving the life of the avatar (the players' representation in the game space), is ideal for this: in essence you are playing to avoid losing, and losing involves dying in often extremely violent ways (see Atkinson and Willis 2007). Violence and death are intertwined cultural expressions in many game spaces (Spokes 2017), and when you are not avoiding death through violence, you are meting out violence on others through your avatar; violence is designed as a reciprocal mechanism.

The bulk of work considering the increased popularity of video games, and the worsening nature of violence in those games, has been from a psychological perspective. This work began by investigating behavioural connections, notably a link between gaming and aggression; however, Dominick (1984) and Schutte et. al (1988), saw mixed results in their studies leading to the consensus at the turn of the century that there was a 'need for additional research' (Dill & Dill 1998:407), though pockets of relational violence research remain (see Anderson and Bushman 2001; Peng, Liu and Mou, 2008; Weber, Behr and Tamborini 2009).

Despite this questioning of causality, the mainstream media is rife with reports that fail to problematize this association (see Parkin 2018; Ducharme 2018 on the White House linking violent games with school shootings). Video games and players seem to occupy an unusual hinterland of cultural engagement; on the one hand, as we have alluded to already, the industry is gigantic and wields considerable financial clout, but in the popular imagination (as framed by media coverage) gaming is still viewed as the preserve of disaffected teenagers, locked in their room, addicted to their games, an issue recently highlighted by the World Health Organization (Reynolds 2018). This hypothetical gamer, the

'social outcast', is the ideal frame on which to posit a simplistic view of the causality of violent conduct. As Rowlands, Ratnabalasuriar and Noel (2016:2) outline:

For many, the fear and misunderstanding surrounding this new medium was exacerbated by purported connections between video game playing and horrific real-world crimes such as spree killings and, especially, school shootings.

Alongside psychological aspects of gaming, a more sociological approach to understanding violence, focused on the complicated interplay between subjective actions and structural problems, has developed. In terms of the GTA franchise, this includes DeVane and Squire's (2008) discussion of themes of race and other social divisions in *GTA: San Andreas*, Yar's work on violence in relation to new media (2012) and Gabbiadini's (et al 2016) work on violent sexism more broadly, highlighting the deeply gendered way that violent themes are coded into play. Alongside this, Redmond (2006:104) has written of the 'devastatingly accurate sense of humour' and 'uproarious satire' presented in earlier iterations of the game – something Leonard refers to as the 'pimping of a corporate ghettocentric imagination' (2006:50). Ribbens and Malliet (2015) have also considered the problematic relationship between violent conduct and meaning-making activities and practices. What this brief sojourn through the field underscores is the level of complexity present in the data with regards to the types of violence empirically tested.

The *Grand Theft Auto* series of games, which from its third iteration opts for an open-world space that players can move through freely, frequently feature as an archetype for research on violence in gaming. For instance, *GTAIII*, 'more so than any popular video game before it [...] celebrated and rewarded simulations of criminal behaviors [sic] by asking players to take on the role of a street criminal' (Rowlands et al 2016:8). Other scholars have detailed how the shift to a vast urban playscape facilitates increased freedom through the suspension of morality (Frasca 2003; Juul 2005), echoed in Sicart's observation that 'a computer game is then a moral object that is actualized by a moral agent' (2009:63). The reason this relationship with morality is important is that, as Atkinson and Willis (2007) attest, there is an interrelationship between simulated and real spaces: they call these emergent spaces the 'ludodrome', an in-game space where play happens but one 'in which real space may be suffused with elements of simulated space and the blending of [...] popular culture' (820). The participants in Atkinson and Willis' study identify the bleed-through of the fictional into the real, articulated in a number of ways such as the act of driving: hearing a song on the radio in the real world pulls people immediately back to their previous experience in the virtual world of *Grand Theft Auto* where the possibility of a slippage into 'car-jacking, light jumping and killing people' (834) is readily acknowledged.

As we discussed earlier, the ludodrome is further developed by Atkinson and Rodgers into the murder box or 'ludic thanatadrome' (2016:1303); these spaces do not simply offer freedom, but they offer freedom to pursue asocial activities that are at turns

violent and deadly. The game space of *GTAV* is not entirely lawless – it features a strangely efficient police force who will relentlessly track you down for infringing in-game rules – but it does encourage specific behaviours and actions that are not legal and can be considered socially and morally reprehensible. Why and how do players choose to engage then? Or, conversely, not engage? Having assessed the trajectory of research into play, violence and the development of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise in academic work, we will now detail how we have gone about empirically testing Atkinson and Rodgers' notion of the murder box in more detail.

Methodology

Previous research looking at the complexity of violence in games such as *GTA* (see Atkinson and Willis 2007; DeVane and Squire 2008) has tended towards recollective interviewing in which participants are required to recall their experiences of gameplay. Our approach, which we term 'interactive elicitation', involves sections of observed gameplay and thematic discussion followed by a semi-structured interview immediately afterwards. As such, this methodological approach combines empirical rigor through semi-structured interviewing, with the embodied experience of play in-the-moment, rather than relying on memory.

Participants (n=15) were sampled opportunistically (Kemper, Stringfield and Teddy 2003), nine were female, six were male. With a participant cohort aged between eighteen and twenty-eight, this study also operates in response to Schott's (2008:1) observation that 'young peoples' voices have been considered irrelevant or unreliable when it comes to discussing the influence and impact of their engagement with screen-mediated depictions of violence'. It is important to acknowledge the impact of social desirability bias (Nederhof 1985) on this data, with participants known to us and also being observed during their gameplay – although we argue that this is necessary in order to obtain data that accounts for the social aspects of play (Huizinga's 1949). The data were analysed thematically (Boyatzis 1998), in line with Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybridized inductive and deductive coding, facilitated through the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Data were collected between January and March 2018. The data collection process for each participant consisted of an hour and half structured-play session, starting with thirty minutes of unrecorded practice time to enable participants to refamiliarize themselves with the game and the interview scenario. This was followed by a further thirty minutes of thematic interviewing which took place during gameplay; here, participants engaged with the open-world of *GTAV* as the character 'Franklin', each starting from the same point in the fictional city of Los Santos (a slimmed down, colour-saturated version of Los Angeles) stood outside the house of the second playable avatar 'Michael'. This location in the game also doubles as the start point for a mission called 'Mr. Philips' – where participants could play as a sociopathic methamphetamine dealer (and the third playable character) called 'Trevor', through a series of tasks where violence frames much of the action. Each participant was given identical instructions to 'play how they would usually play'. The thematic interviews during gameplay had a rapport-building function, but also

offered an opportunity for participants to narrate their experiences and offer some background on themselves as gamers. Of the fifteen participants (all anonymized as P1-15), **P1; P7; P5; P10; P12** and **P14** did not undertake the 'Mr. Philips' mission. **P2; P3; P4; P8; P13** and **P15** did the mission, as well as some free-play. **P9** and **P11** completed the mission quickly, and spent the rest of their time free-playing. Lastly, **P6** tried to do as many missions as they possibly could, including one side-mission where they had to kill twenty-five people in a certain time.

The final thirty minutes of interactive elicitation consisted of a semi-structured interview, with an opening section of standardized questions about their initial experiences – 'was it fun?'; 'how well did you do?' – followed by specific sections broken down into 'participant agency', 'characterization' and the narrative features of the game. The interview ended with a broader discussion considering the wider social context of the game in terms of its depiction of space(s).

The following three subsections will highlight the predominant approaches to play from our data, namely; *player-game interactions towards violence* (1); *towards nonviolent encounters in the form of pro-social behaviour* (2); and *consumption* (3).

Inside the Murder Box

Violence was experienced in a variety of ways by our participants. Whilst all participants encountered subjective violence (Žižek 2008) at some point during their gameplay, **P5** used their play-through almost exclusively for killing – having shot a motorist with an Uzi within thirty seconds of starting, they accrued four wanted stars (out of a possible five) after just four minutes. **P5** favoured unchecked violence to an extreme, telling us that they usually took the approach of massacring as many people as possible, and seeing how long they could evade the authorities for. **P5** was also our only participant to pursue a different gameplay narrative (other than the Mr Philips mission or just general free-play), opting for an alternate playable mission from Franklin's story arc. After that, they spent the remaining minutes of their gameplay hammering pedestrians to death on the sidewalk.

This was the most overt expression of a participant fulfilling violent desires in our data set, with other approaches offering more nuanced engagement through a variety of channels. For instance, we found evidence to support Atkinson and Rodgers' (2016:1302) account that violence is woven into the fabric of the game narrative, arguing that 'there is a need for scoping analyses of the ways in which hegemonic norms and values are reproduced through the scripts and assumptions of many games'. Specifically, they refer to achievements for 'holding-up' all twenty shops in the game; a mission where the player needs to engage in brutal torture in order to progress; and 'rampage-mode', a side-mission where players are challenged to kill as many bystanders as possible. **P6** engaged in the latter:

P6 [Did that say ‘neutralise 25 rednecks?’ Is this a full mission or just an extra mission?] It’s one of the little pop-up missions that come along but they are the character specific ones.

P6 approached *GTAV* with the attitude of trying to achieve as much of the game narrative as possible inside of the thirty-minute play-through. This involved two full missions – ‘Mr Philips’; ‘Nervous Ron’; then ‘Rampage Mode’, before finishing part way through a third mission: ‘Trevor Philips Industries.’¹ **P6** died during their first rampage, and ‘retried’ in order to succeed before moving on. Our participants cited these, as well as many other, narrative and structural pulls towards violence, beginning with the less explicit – the sheer availability of opportunities for violent acts:

P12 Well, yeah but there’s too many temptations. They do put too many temptations in there for you. [Could you give us some descriptions?] Gun shops.

P1 It gives you the opportunity to do that and it gives you a character that stereotypically would do that because of just how he is.

P12 outlines the sheer quantity and availability of guns as pushing the player towards violence in virtual-space – reinforcing the argument that openness and opportunity to transgress is what affords limitless, hegemonic violence (Atkinson and Rodgers 2016). **P1** agrees, highlighting what appears to be race and class-labelling embedded within the game narrative of the underprivileged, urban-dwelling, black protagonist Franklin. It is difficult to play as Franklin in a law-abiding way. **P1** notes that, even when trying to walk harmlessly down the street, the game provokes the player towards violence by reinforcing stereotypes that pedestrians might be intimidated by, or want to start a fight with, your avatar. All three playable characters represent some sort of stereotypical, hegemonic masculinity and embody, or engender, gendered violence (Gabbadini et. al. 2016) – from Michael, a wealthy, white gangster who objectifies women to Trevor, a sociopathic meth dealer who kills without consideration. Despite these stereotypes, a pattern of improbable reactions still emerges – the unrealistic and confrontational way in which the game responds to players’ input.

P7 You’ve bumped into them and they jump back and shout something. If that was in reality that would be like strange.

P9 You get in a fight with someone and the police come and they immediately start shooting you. [...] You can’t really go anywhere

¹ See IGN.com (2018) – Grand Theft Auto 5 Walkthrough (wiki) for a description of each mission.

without getting started on can you. [...] you can't walk down the street without someone being like, oh, 'what's up bro?'

P7 and **P9** argue that the game provokes violence from the player by using confrontational 'symbolic violence' (Žižek 2008) as embedded in language, and blatant unprovoked subjective violence in addition. **P7** describes this symbolic violence as 'strange', and **P9** sums this up as an exaggeration of expected forms of interpersonal interaction, culminating in extreme unprovoked violence from the police. Whilst the game does present opportunities for violent encounters (Atkinson and Rodgers 2016) and allows the player to behave towards people in a way that they would not normally do – so too does the game behave abnormally towards the player, coaxing them into violent encounters that appear incongruous out of context.

GTAV's difficulty also had an impact, and some less-experienced players noted this contributing to accidental instances of interpersonal violence. **P3**, having not quite mastered the skill of in-game driving, accidentally hit a pedestrian thereby alerting the authorities. Within moments of starting, they found themselves on the run from the police, fleeing from black Special Operations helicopters raining heavy machine gunfire on their vehicle. In their haste to escape, they accidentally hit and killed several non-player characters, so we see interpersonal violence as a by-product of player aptitude, something further articulated by other participants. The technical competencies required to 'play successfully' turned **P3's** attempts at law-abiding play into lawlessness, whereas other participants experienced this through non-player character engagement. **P14's** accidental encounter was caused by Chop, Franklin's unruly in-game dog, when they tried to take him for a walk:

P14 Getting my boy. [Get your what, sorry?] My boy, Chop. I love it. He's attacking the police officers because I've ran away [...] look at him, he's going for it. [Poor Chop]. He doesn't give a shit. Look, he's like killed someone. Chop! Chop! [This has escalated from where you wanted to be hasn't it?] All I wanted to do was take Chop for a walk!

P14 yelled at the screen and tried to call the dog back as he mauled police officers and dodged gunfire. They had set out to demonstrate how Chop could be taken for a walk or bundled into cars, but they made it no further than the street corner of Franklin's house before Chop attacked police officers, attracted heavy artillery, and dragged the initially innocuous gameplay into a violent shootout. This tension and inexorable move towards violence also demonstrates the original 'ludodrome' thesis (Atkinson and Willis 2007), where the bleed-through from the real appears in the shape of questioning the narrative architecture of the game (see Jenkins 2005): how can the innocent actions of driving or taking a dog for a walk spiral into vicious mayhem so routinely?

Atkinson and Rodgers (2016:1302) also acknowledge that violence is narrative-driven, stating that it 'tells us something about our culture; more importantly, however, it

tells us something of the kinds of social and commercial structures that undergird their proliferation and incorporation into everyday life' – a sentiment shared by Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014:1) who state that 'all games express and embody human values'. It is certain that 'social and commercial structures' of violence can be witnessed in the fabric of this game because 'as a cultural medium, games carry embedded beliefs within their systems of representation and their structures, whether game designers intend these ideologies or not' (Flanagan 2009:223). We witnessed aggression and violence as part of these embedded beliefs, as does Flanagan (ibid):

[GTA] was not created as an educational game, but nonetheless does impart a world view, and while the game portrays its world as physically similar to our own [...] the game world's value system is put forward as one of success achieved through violence, rewarding criminal behaviour and reinforcing racial and gender stereotypes.

These designed-in deviant elements – or the game's 'rules', for Sicart (2009:23), are what constitute the ethics of the game itself, but this does not detract from the equally important role of the player and their decisions as a 'moral being' (ibid:61).

Outside the Murder Box: Pro-Social Behaviour

Video gameplay has been described as 'designed experience' in terms of coded-in structures (Flanagan 2009; Sicart 2009) but Squire (2006) has argued that this experience is also moulded by the ways in which players choose to interact with the game. This, as Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014:46) discuss, means that 'the moral character of the game could depend significantly on how the player decides to engage with it': the meaning of the game then is crafted by both player and programmer together. Whereas the rules of the game might represent its ethics (Sicart 2009), we can also understand the *player* as the 'moral being' – with the *GTA* series operating specifically as 'an extremely compelling ethical game experience' (ibid:61). This can be observed with regards to 'player responsibility' with regards to the tension between game rules, and a suite of characters that are not always invested in violent acts. Towards the end of the previous section we teased out some of these associations – the disparity between what the player was trying to achieve and the direction the game pushed them towards – so following Sicart, in this section we unpack the role of player choice in considering the ethics and morality of gaming: the game may have violence designed-in, as Atkinson and Rodgers attest, but this does not delimit player agency necessarily.

A clear example of how the game can incentivise violence, or presents ethical/moral choices through the rubric of unavoidable violent actions in the central narrative (akin to Atkinson and Rodger's 'torture' example), is a subsection of the 'Mr. Philips' mission our participants played, the 'threatening of Ortega'. Participants that made it to the end of the mission are given a final instruction to 'threaten' a rival gang leader. In order to progress

past this point, the player *has to* engage in physical violence – and in every recorded instance, this resulted in Ortega’s death despite the majority of participants trying to avoid it:

P3 Oh, no he’s going to drown! Get out. Get out! Okay, I can’t drag him out. I don’t want to shoot him.

P3 Really bad but I didn’t want to shoot him because I didn’t want to kill him and I thought that just by punching him it would just sort of be like, oh, a little punch, there you go, you’ve threatened him. And it didn’t... like...

P3 punches Ortega, and he falls down into a river and drowns. **P3** is so confounded by this accidental act of killing that they shout at the screen, urging the character to stand up: they then tried to push Ortega’s lifeless corpse out of the river bed. In the following interview they clarified their position – they had not intended to kill Ortega, the game enacted this violence against their will. Other reactions were more measured, with **P4** explaining they had only intended on threatening rather than killing. **P9** was the only one to fully embrace violence and confess to enjoying killing, or not seeing a need to try and obey the guidance of the mission, stating ‘if you have the option to kill someone you might as well just go for it’. These differing decisions towards or away from violence are set against a backdrop of an array of pro-social play or comments.

Despite unavoidable pushes towards violence, we witnessed several participants curtailing their own ‘unchecked experiences’ in the murder box – for instance, **P15** and others chose to follow the rules of the road when driving, their player agency favouring conformity over the privileged nonconformity of the zone of exception, something Welsh (2005), writing about the GTA series, has called ‘everyday play’:

P2 When I’m doing my own thing, like I was having... [...] if I pursued that longer I think I would have had more fun than if I’d chased these guys to their biker hideout.

P2 states simply that they ‘have more fun’ pursuing their own, nonviolent narrative. Here then we begin to question the assumption that a murder box is a necessarily violent space, despite narrative and programmed nudges towards violence, and instead consider some gameplay decisions that are more pro-social, favouring conformity over crime. Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) call into question contemporary society’s values when harm has become such a profitable cultural commodity. **P11** speaks directly to their values in the face of seemingly limitless opportunities for violence:

P11 I know it's the point of the game but I don't really like the shooting missions or anything. [...] It just doesn't do anything for me. I know other people are like, yeah, it's imaginary, it's fun, it's great. I just say, oh, what if he had a family?

P11 refers to the real/virtual binary discussed earlier when talking about their nonviolent choices. A perpetual drive of game developers to cultivate more realistic experiences (Wages et al 2004) has manifested as reluctance, or an enhanced form of self-control (Elias 1994) away from violent acts. Video game environments are made up of realistic and 'fantastic' game elements, according to Schwartz (2006:315) who describes *GTA San Andreas*, as a 'gritty' interplay between the two – 'because of this combination of fantasy and realism, differentiating the two elements becomes difficult. At what point do the carjackings and drive-by shootings become fantasy?' (ibid:316).

For **P11**, in the face of their friends telling them that the game is fantasy, they attribute their reluctance to be violent to in-game realism. One might expect that realism could detract from fantasy in play, but as Schwartz (2006) argues, we observe the opposite – a realistic representation makes fantasy more believable. Before these comments, **P11** had already revealed their dislike of game violence as being more complicated than 'realism' and included a contemporary political context:

P11 Is there a way to opt out of this mission? I'm only asking because like I don't really want to shoot people because of the shooting yesterday, the one in the school. [...] I don't get the fun out of shooting I get the fun out of driving the cars around.

P11 began the mission, but after realising that it was necessarily violent, asked to restart. This interview took place the day after the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Florida, U.S.A. (Laughland et al 2018), and **P11** felt that executing meth dealers and biker gangs would be in poor taste – they followed this up with the clarification that their play is generally nonviolent, and that they use the open-world of *GTAV* as a driving simulator. These comments can be understood through Elias' (1994:5) description of civilisation as the 'self-consciousness of the West'. He argues that our sense of superiority is internalised – 'the social constraint towards self-constraint' (365) – which **P11** exercises. **P11**'s comments are also a concise critique of the criminological metanarrative that we call into question. In this instance, the player's engagement with violence does not appear as an impulsive reaction to the mere presence of opportunity. Instead, when the game presents structured narrative violence, **P11** uses this as an opportunity to reflect on the appropriateness of violence more broadly. On this, Zagal (2011:21) tells us that:

Games can be an ideal medium for providing players with experiences that make them reflect on their ethics and moral reasoning by helping

players identify moral or ethical issues, encourage them to assess their own ethical values and the social context of issues identified, and also consider the ramifications of alternative actions.

GTAV provides players with these unusual and morally questionable experiences that, depending on the individual player's moral disposition (Sicart 2009), can prompt them with experiences that they are unused to, offering a space for nuanced consideration of their own ethical values. In open-world games such as this that present the player with opportunities for multiple progression pathways, reflective behaviour has manifested as a nonviolent trajectory through the game. This antagonism of morality and constraint can even be seen in our more violent participants, where there is a sense that sometimes the game goes 'too far':

P3 I liked the chasing bit. I didn't like the... like I didn't mind the shooting bit but then I thought there was too many people for one person to shoot all of.

P4 there's a point [...] when someone gets sucked into a jet engine. It's like how far is too far, in a sense. I think that was even more detached because I think you don't control anyone in that scenario.

For **P3**, the sheer quantity and repetitiveness of aggression inside of mission play is too intense, and they reference other more sociable aspects of gameplay such as 'chasing' (driving) that are preferred. For **P4** it is the embedded narrative violence of the mission cutscene that, although skippable, is referenced as 'too extreme' of an experience for the open-world game. Cutscenes, small snippets of character activity and story that the player watches but cannot influence, are a key tool for driving forward narrative (Mukherjee 2015) in video games – the violence in which both **P4** and **P2** call upon directly:

P4 I probably enjoyed that [the plot] more than the physical, you know, shooting of people, as such.

P2 I know this is so sad, but like then I do a mission I'm like, okay, well my version of Trevor doesn't do that. He doesn't want to have sex in a house full of cockroaches. He wants to be riding around in his car on the right side of the road.

P4 values the plot of *GTAV* over the agentic violence that the player is involved in, whereas **P2** eschews the game narrative altogether: they are not interested in the cutscene framing of Trevor due to the symbolic and subjective violence depicted. Instead, they develop their own versions of the more objectionable characters in their mind – ones that obey the law,

or at least the rules of the road and go about their business of being a criminal in a more pro-social way. One of the ways in which **P2** is able to achieve this is through the various options for customising characters which relates to our third subsection on the role of consumption in the game:

Outside the murder box: Consumption

Despite the ‘murder box’ being rooted in the work of Presdee (2000) and an ensuing criminological metanarrative that sees the consumption of crime as a means by which to escape the banality of consumer-capitalism, we witnessed all of our participants engaging in forms of virtual consumption, with some participants exclusively framing their gaming around buying.

P12 opted straight for consumption stating immediately that they were going to ‘dress him [avatar] up’ – they got a haircut, and bought explosives from a gun shop that were never used. **P10** spent their time exploring the open-world, flying a plane, running to the top of a mountain, and then getting a cable car down into the forest. They still used the open-world to do things that they were unlikely to do in real life, but without violence.

P1 I’ve never done missions. All I do is just walk around and do whatever I feel like doing. [...] I don’t think I’m going to be very good at the missions. Because like I got fired from being a taxi driver.

Whatever **P1** ‘feels like’ doing is driven by dominant consumer capitalist frameworks of capital accumulation and spending. The libidinous ‘ID’-driven hedonist (Freud 1973) implied in Atkinson and Rodgers’ typification might slaughter, steal or defraud for their spending money – instead, **P1** works as a taxi driver to fund their desire to go to the funfair – a form of unpaid game labour similar to Kücklich’s (2005) concept of ‘playbour’.

This too is evident in Bauman’s (2007) ‘liquid consumption’, a relationship with working (production) and spending (consumption) so pervasive as to become part of the ambient temperature of contemporary culture. **P1** was the only participant to set about *earning* money, but others also highlighted money as a concern:

P13 I need money to get my hair cut. [I think you’ve got some money. There’s a little bit there] I need more.

P13 Okay, so I had quite a lot of money on me as well so I wanted to spend it. I wanted to make the guy look different. It was getting bit boring, looking at the same guy all the time.

P13, playing as Franklin, had \$2,000 (more than enough), yet categorically declared that more was needed. Later, playing as Trevor, they had over \$100,000, which ended up being spent on new clothes. **P15** killed Ortega and then immediately proclaimed ‘I’m going to get

my hair cut' with a seamless segue between violence and consumption that characterized the freedom of gameplay. **P10** described the plot of the game on these terms:

P10 To earn money. [...] you'd want to be quite materialistic. You'd want the nice cars. I know Franklin starts off in this really like little bungalow I think and then he goes and he has like this amazing apartment but this is like obviously when he's got more into it. So I suppose it's quite maybe materialistic. Like you want the better things maybe because they couldn't get it in other ways.

Agentically players want nice things but the game also has embedded materialism in its narrative, with characters that start out poor and work their way up the ladder. **P10** speaks using the language of the murder box, suggesting that the game can be used for experiences that would be out of reach in the non-virtual world, but applies this logic to consumption rather than violence. When we asked participants to list the different facets of the game, fourteen emphasized these elements of consumption as central to their gameplay, including buying and customising cars (**P2**), getting tattoos (**P6**) and personalizing their avatar through changing clothes and going to the gym (**P7**). This engagement in consumption is with the aim of personalising the game and cultivating a sense of individuality, something that Lash and Lury (2007) argue is a definitional quality of mediated, media-driven consumption.

Consuming fitness as time spent in the gym, on the other hand, is not just player-driven vanity but has game-driven consequences for progression with **P4** explaining how gym time improved the stamina of their avatar in terms of increased running speed. This manifests as the 'merging of work and play' (Goggin 2011:357) that is pervasive in modern gaming where repetitive, structured tasks like working out become embedded in play pushed by both the game and the player respectively.

The game also features consumption as 'liquid' (Bauman 2007) in the gameplay narrative. **P12** highlighted a want, in their own gameplay, to have expensive cars and houses for their own enjoyment, and that the game will lack enjoyment (not be 'good') without it: big houses are 'a big thing in the game'. **P11** describes the progressive arc of gameplay as 'trying to kind of climb their way up the capitalist monster' in a way not dissimilar Schwartz's (2006) argument that the *GTA* series is a useful critique of modern, urban life. Above all, this supports an argument that whilst consumption is embedded within gameplay it is also a player-driven choice in these types of games; this is reinforced further when considering the online version of *GTAV*, where missions are reduced and free, open-world play is heightened. In this more competitive multiplayer environment, consumption is enhanced rather than reduced. **P10** explained how you have to operate the various clubs in *GTA Online* as 'kind of like a business' centred on a slow, progressive accumulation of money, skills and assets. With a relative lack of structured missions (although they are present and developed into group-play scenarios), players of the online game devolve to

enterprise and consumption as primary facets of play – on top of established acts of aggression and violence.

Discussion and Conclusions

Huizinga's (1949:46) words in *Homo Ludens* lend themselves to Atkinson and Rodgers' (2016) idea that video gaming represents a decay of moral integrity in modern Western society: 'culture arises in the form of play, it is played from the very beginning'. But the implication that culture is formed in play is quickly clarified: 'by this we do not mean that play turns into culture, rather that in its earliest phases culture has the play-character, that it proceeds in the shape and the mood of play' (ibid). For Huizinga, play and culture are intertwined – playful competition and contest actually have civilising functions. For Elias (1994) technology is also a civilising force that is double-edged in that it both represents a civilised society and draws societies towards civil behaviour through the constraints that it can place on an individual – there is 'almost nothing which cannot be done in a "civilised" or an "uncivilised" way' (Elias 1994:5; see also Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Playing is intensely pro-social – 'the result of the game is unimportant and a matter of indifference' (Huizinga 1949:49) and does not automatically represent a breakaway from 'the civil' because of the inclusion of aggression.

Instead, the ways in which Elias' work plays out in 'play' is a dualism. In the first (1) instance, we find support for the sort of breakaway, unabated violence written about by Atkinson and Rodgers (2016:2013):

To play in these spaces is to experience certain forms of freedom from inhibitions – both social and psychological – and an inevitable subjugation of others encountered in these spaces as cannon fodder, expendable or necessary collateral damage.

This argument is an extension of Elias and Dunning's (1993) notion that the over-civilisation of daily life will result in people expressing libidinal drives inside of accepted, culturally normalized frameworks such as sport (see also Lyng 1990 on 'edgework'). This is reinforced by the structured violence embedded within the playspace that we discussed in the first data section but is simultaneously challenged by a similar degree of embedded consumption, work, and capitalistic activities from which players are said to be seeking a departure. Violence inside the murder box is as often as narrative-based as it is player driven; activities that are player-driven *do* include violence but also a variety of nonviolent, arguably pro-social, behaviours. Elias (1994:162) alludes to 'zones of exception' in his description of periods of social unrest:

All these forms of pleasure, hemmed in by threats of displeasure, have gradually come to express themselves only indirectly, in a "refined"

form. And only at times of social upheaval or where social control is looser do they break out more directly, uninhibitedly.

Video gaming, it is worth noting, is not in the spirit of Elias's writing on less-constrained, exceptional social circumstances like 'colonial regions' (1994:162) – nor does video gaming necessarily exist in a liminal phase of unrest between social structures as a dominant form of popular culture. Instead, Elias' work culminates in his analogism of 'the social constraint towards self-constraint' (1994:364). As discussed in the introduction, this is the idea that restricting, civilising forces are internalised and that civilisation was not 'brought about rationally' (365) but instead exists in a sort of subconscious as external factors have been 'converted into self-restraints' (ibid) that are not immediately disrupted by the mere presence of opportunity. This brings us to the second (2) relevance of Elias' work that has been understated.

Elias argues that drives 'form a kind of circuit in the human being' (1994:161) – his central premise being that civilising forces are internalised, and only in extreme circumstances could the superegoesque tug of self-constraint (brought about by an ascending arc of civilisation) be completely abandoned: he states it 'is only in dreams or in isolated outbursts that we account for as pathological that something of its immediate and unregulated force appears' (ibid:162). The way in which aggression functions, he suggests, relates to the interdependence of technical apparatus by individuals, 'confined and tamed by innumerable rules and prohibitions that have become self-constraints' (ibid:161). Whilst the 'technical apparatus' impacts how aggression manifests itself, what we see in this data is that self-constraint is internalised in such a way that participants routinely allied themselves with civilised and pro-social actions and activities *despite* the seemingly endless opportunity for simulated violence.

In sum, rather than thoughtless violence, we have demonstrated how the concept of the murder box – and the scaffolding metanarrative of harm around it – is problematized by complicated and varying individual player choices, choices that oscillate between pro-social aspects such as working, obeying the rules of the road, and consumption *as well as* violence.

Atkinson and Rodgers (2016:1303) ask a pertinent question in what all of this means: 'what does the prevalence of extreme forms of violence, killing and warfare in video game content tell us about our culture?' As a response, we have considered how violence plays out in 'play' and proposed a closer attention to player agency. In making this argument, we can draw again from Sicart (2009:62) who argues that whilst games have inbuilt ethics (see the structured violence written about in our first section), 'as players we are moral beings, and our actions within a game are evaluated precisely from our nature as moral players'. We find support for this argument in our second two subsections, presenting data that suggests players make measured, careful and deliberate choices inside of the game space. Poremba mirrors this position, writing that agency in *GTAV* is complex, and sits 'somewhere in a nebulous region between player, designer and system' (2006:199). With a greater affordance of opportunities for violence in the most recent iteration of the game, we have

demonstrated that programmed-in violence does not represent the totality of player agency, and nor is the violence afforded by the open-world always taken advantage of.

What we are arguing for is a more measured approach to player-game interaction when it comes to violence, with consideration for these complicated interactions between player, game and system. Alongside this, we rearticulate Sicart's (2009:63) statement that 'the player is a reflective subjectivity who comes into the game with [...] her cultural and embodied presence': in that respect our follow-up work will consider external, cultural differences between players, and social divisions, in particular, gender and social class.

Violence in the murder box is not exclusively anti or asocial despite the game design, but is enacted and embodied in various ways through the agency of players (Poremba 2006), in their choices to obey different sets of rules, to import their own moral codes (Sicart 2009) into the open-world of Los Santos, or to actively shy away from violence through their own narrative choices. Our contribution is to demonstrate support for, but also problematize, the initial conceptual premise and the broader criminological metanarrative on which it is based, that sees cultural forms of violence as an escape from over-civilised everyday life and the banality of consumption. We account for civilised behaviour and consumptive practices in the murder box by doubling-down on the role of play as a civilizing process (Elias 2000), and accounting for player agency that can be found in internalised forms of restraint that diffuse into virtual-space.

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