Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Denham, Jack, Hirschler, Steven and Spokes, Matthew (2019) Consumptive play : the reification of capitalism in Grand Theft Auto Online. Proceedings of DiGRA 2019.

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/3892/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Consumptive Play: The Reification of Capitalism in Grand Theft Auto Online

Dr Jack Denham
York St John University
Lord Mayors Walk
York
01904 876579
j.denham@yorksj.ac.uk

Dr Steven Hirschler, Dr Matthew Spokes
York St John University
Lord Mayors Walk
York
01904 876394, 01904 876279
s.hirschler@yorksj.ac.uk, m.spokes@yorksj.ac.uk

Keywords
Grand Theft Auto, Violence, Capitalism, Deviant Leisure, Consumption

BODY TEXT (EXTENDED ABSTRACT SUBMISSION)

Introduction
Although previous iterations of GTA have casinos that are accessible to the player (thirteen in GTA San Andreas, including three that are accessible), the casinos in both GTA5 and its spinoff, GTA Online, remain closed. Despite no official line on why this is the case in the face of high levels of demand for the feature in online communities, there has been widespread speculation that the microtransactions present in GTA Online – that would allow players to trade actual money for fictitious money and play the casinos 'for real' – would violate online gambling laws present in many countries and several US states. GTA, then, occupies a position where 'real' monetization prevents an engagement with the fictitious monetized play that has come to characterize the franchise.

This paper addresses the introduction of microtransactions into Grand Theft Auto Online (Henceforth: GTA Online) and considers them as part of the lineage of the GTA franchise which has always played with a satirical take on consumptive practice and capitalism in general. GTA, since its third iteration, has been seen by academics as good place to study cultural changes surrounding play and play-money, leisure, work and 'playbour' (Kücklich 2005). This includes the capitalistic game narratives that have been called 'the pimping of a corporate ghettocentric imagination' (Leonard 2006:50) – to the 'devastatingly accurate sense of humour' (Redmond 2006:104) through which these themes are embodied in the urban reality of fictitious microcosms of New York and LA; respectively 'Liberty City' and 'Los Santos'.

Using Galloway's (2004:1) concept of 'social realism' - 'those games that reflect critically on the minutia of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama and injustice' - and qualitative gameplay data, we find that GTA's sense of the real mirrors themes of structural violence (Galtung 1969) around consumption. With the addition of microtransactions in the online version of GTA, in essence reifying once

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

© 2019 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

fictional money, we find that critical engagement with satirical themes of consumptive violence are diminished in favour of actual consumptive play. To that end, this paper explores the ways in which the new introduction of 'recurrent consumer spending' (microtransactions) is doubly interesting in the case of GTA: that it simultaneously furthers the consumptive themes long since embedded in the game whilst departing from the critical-satirical tone that has contributed to the game's popularisation.

Method

We collected qualitative data (n=15) using hour-long, semi-structured 'interactive elicitation' (Spokes & Denham, 2019) interviews where participants played the game with us and responded to open-ended questions, following Sommerseth's (2007: 765) sentiment that 'realism in video games is dependent on the player's embodied experience of play as opposed to mimetic representation'. We empirically interrogate notions of the 'realistic' (Galloway 2004), the Lacanian 'real' (Žižek 2009) and the 'violent' (Galtung 1969) during gameplay to assess the impact that the inclusion of microtransactions have on GTA's critical satire on consumptive life.

Findings

Rather than exploring microtransactions through ethics and legality (Zendle & Cairns 2018), aesthetics (Felczak 2018) and economics (Zoran Tomić 2018), we instead investigate the transformative role that actual consumption can have on more abstract consumptive gameplay itself. We find that players engaged critically with satirical themes of consumption, enhancing playability and a sense of the 'real', 'the inexorable "abstract", spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality' (Žižek's 2009:11). However, this immersive form of 'social reality' (Galloway 2004) was broken when actual consumption is introduced.

Distinctions were made by participants between 'realism' as it is understood through playability - evidenced using the mechanics of the game - and the 'real' as it is perceived through the game's unending commitment to actualizing systemic violence in its multiple forms: liquid consumption, capitalistic progression, and embedded stereotyping. Players critiqued playable 'realism', finding multiple programming shortcomings and loopholes that made their interaction with the game less like non-virtual life. However, there was consensus amongst participants that GTA featured a convincing narrative embodiment of the 'real'.

Brock (2017:168) has argued that, historically, video games have been 'seen to provide the consumer with a temporary relief from the disappointments of material reality' – and historically, the GTA franchise has played with this relief by operationalising material reality as a playable story arc. In unpacking structural violence through consumptive play as the critical tool that makes the game immersive, and the forerunning provider of player perceptions of realness, we can evidentially support the idea that non-satirical consumption through microtransactions destabilizes this immersive reality. Whilst GTAV engages players by asking them to progress through a series of satirically-framed capitalistic tasks, objectives and missions – GTA Online steps outside of this immersive player-game loop by allowing players to bypass the money-oriented fictions of the game and 'cheat' their way to progress with actual money instead.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brock, T. (2017). Videogame Consumption: The Apophatic Dimension. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. 17:2 pp167-183

Felczak, M. (2018). Aesthetics and Cosmetic Microtransactions in Path of Exile. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2018*

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), pp.167–191

Galloway, A. (2004). Social Realism in Gaming. *Game Studies*, 4(1)

Kücklich, J. (2005). Precarious playbour: Modders in the digital games industry. *Fibreculture*

Leonard, D. (2006). *Virtual Gangstas, Coming to a Suburban House Near You: Demonization, Commodification, and Policing Blackness*. In Garrelts, N. (ed). The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays. London: McFarland & Co

Redmond, D. (2016). *Grand Theft Video: Running and Gunning for the U.S. Empire*. In Garrelts, N. (ed). The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays. London: McFarland & Co

Zendle, D. & Cairns, P. (2018). Video Game Loot Boxes are Lined to Problem Gambling: Results of a Large-Scale Survey. *PloS one* 13(11), pp1-12

Zizek, S. (2009). *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections. London*: Profile Books Ltd.

Zoran Tomić, N. (2018). Economic Model of Microtransactions in Video Games. *Journal of Economic Science Research*. 1(1), pp17-23