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The Reification of Structural Violence in Video Games

Abstract

The Grand Theft Auto franchise features prominently within existing research exploring graphic, virtual, lawless, and damagingly realistic interpersonal violence within video games. Following a review of this literature, we empirically interrogate notions of the 'realistic' and the 'violent' during gameplay, finding that the undertones of systemic, structural, capitalistic violence are experienced by players as providing the gritty sense of the 'real' that the game has been criticised for. Using Galtung's concept of 'structural violence' and Žižek's notion of the 'real', we unpack structural violence as the forerunning violent experience in the open world game. Due to the hidden and subdued nature of this violence, often taken for granted and experienced passively, we argue that it is the most impactful player experience that simultaneously makes the game playable and contextualises violent game activities. For cultural criminology, our data suggest that embedded and discrete forms of violence should be the leading edge of concern when studying the digital economy and playable forms of social harm.

Keywords: deviant leisure; structural violence; systemic violence; GTA; video games

Introduction

The study of deviance in video games is dominated by forms of violence that Žižek (2009:1) identifies as 'subjective', which is 'directly visible' and 'performed by a clearly identifiable agent' (see Ferguson et al. 2008; Ferguson et al. 2011; Engelhardt et al. 2011; DeLisi 2013). That is to say that the definition of violence is often limited to forms of direct, interpersonal harm associated with extreme conduct and 'realistic' imagery, blood, gore and death. They have written about the dangers of its gruesome realism, and in turn, the concept of 'realism' understood as graphically, mechanically accurate representations of subjective violence (Galloway 2004). But this cyclical focus on violence being graphically realistic reinforcing realism as defined through graphic violence, overlooks the fact that there are multiple types of violence (Žižek 2009), and multiple ways to access or understand perceptions of realism in gaming (Galloway 2004; Malliet 2006).

On violence, Žižek (2009:9) warns that this preoccupation with the subjective may obfuscate other harms: 'is there not something suspicious about this focus on subjective violence […], doesn't it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble?' Atkinson & Rodgers (2016) suggest that a relationship exists between depictions of interpersonal harm and the more implicit violence ingrained in social and economic systems. They argue that players' desire to engage with the obvious themes of subjective violence in games, such as *Grand Theft Auto V,* is reflective of the nature of the capitalistic, systemically violent outside world. In other words, highly visible forms of direct physical harm exist within, and are an outcome of, the violence inherent in exclusionary competitional capitalism. Žižek

(2009:8) explains that this latter 'systemic violence' includes 'more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation'. There are clear similarities between Žižek's systemic violence and Galtung's concept of 'structural violence', which manifests 'as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances' (Galtung, 1969:171). Galtung questions the extent to which a popular preoccupation with *direct*, interpersonal violence overshadows awareness of and concern for the broader violence arising from social and economic imbalances. This structural violence is pervasive and often normalised to such a degree that it is largely invisible; it is 'about as natural as the air around us' (ibid:173).

By incorporating these widespread and often hidden forms of violence into the current study, we aim to advance the discussion of violence in video games beyond issues of observable, interpersonal harm to include wider harms, such as income inequality and access to healthcare, that are structurally reinforced within social, political and economic environments. The interrogation of video game realism and 'realistic' violence is therefore dependent upon a consideration of both direct violence and the violence that pervades societal structures; it also requires an engagement with subtler definitions of realism.

On realism, to which these concepts are inextricably linked in their domination of the way that we experience the world around us, Žižek (2009:11) draws upon Lacan, stating that '"reality" is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable "abstract", spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality'. Specifically referring to video games, Galloway (2004:1) has echoed the Lacanian Real, calling realistic games: 'those games that reflect critically on the minutia of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama and injustice'.

We investigate this struggle, personal drama and injustice in our case study game, *GTAV*, which is estimated to be the highest grossing media product of all time (Donnelly 2018). It is the fifth major release in the Grand Theft Auto franchise, which has become a poster child for criticisms about transgressive themes in video games. It is an open-world, third-person game where players control an avatar character inside a fictional American city and play their way through its gritty underworld, its night-time economy, and its gang subcultures: that said, it focuses on 'popular culture's mediation of contemporary American cities instead of directly mapping physical terrain' (Bogost & Klainbaum 2006:162). As an open-world game players have the choice between following the game's narrative arc and accepting its various gang-related 'missions', or using the space like a city simulator, forging their own pathways through its streets, building their own wealth and possessions, enacting their own violent choices, or just going to get a haircut.

Employing a thematic analysis of qualitative data from fifteen in-depth gameplay-interviews ('interactive elicitation', see AUTHOR & AUTHOR 2019), we observe these divergent gameplay pathways and investigate under-explored aspects of violent video gameplay. We find that systemically violent aspects of gameplay, as opposed to representations of graphic interpersonal harm, were understood as the most 'realistic', as participants attached the concept of the 'Real' to systemically violent, financially unequal and racially divisive themes, rather than game mechanics, picture-postcard graphics, or blood-

drenched cutscenes. We argue that systemic violence is productive of the sense of violent realism that has caused so much concern regarding video games. *GTAV,* specifically, is a playable sandpit of structural violence with the gap between potential and actual realisations of wellbeing (Galtung 1969) operationalised as the main objective of play. Following our previous work on how subjective violence is played in video games (AUTHOR & AUTHOR 2018), we argue for a greater criminological focus in video games on the *violence that you cannot see*, because this is the violence that is most effectively deployed, readily embraced and subversively experienced.

Literature review

In using a video game as a site of enquiry, Grey (2009:1) has argued that games should 'be read critically, not simply as expressions of culture or as products of consumption, but as objects through which we can *think*'. Similarly, Jenkins (2006:26) has argued that 'as game designers have discovered and mastered their medium, they have become increasingly reflective about the player's experience of violent fantasy'. In our use of critical reflection through the prism of *GTAV*, we continue to branch away from reductive notions of purely subjective violence and offer a critical criminology of violent play and representational social consequences.

Latorre (2015) explains that widespread popular engagement with video games evidences their 'increasing importance' in sculpting and shaping the collective social imaginary. Given their expanding prominence as a form of interactive, consumable media, video games' role in framing constructions and interpretations of criminality is also significant. Philips & Strobl (2016: 307) argue that the 'meaning of crime […] is created, consumed and re-created' within various types of media, and Hayward (2012) states that deviance occupies an broadening segment of leisure activities. He suggests that 'images' facilitate exposure to crime: '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' (2012:1). This presents a compelling case underscoring the need for further research into the contemporary culture of deviant leisure (Smith & Raymen 2016); this article contributes an analysis of less-visible types of interactive, simulated violence. Here we will focus first on framing debates around violence, before exploring types of systemic violence in the literature.

Violence in video games is ubiquitous (King and Krzywinska 2006:62) and is nowhere more contested than in the Rockstar Games' franchise, *Grand Theft Auto*. Earlier titles in the franchise saw what Kerr (2006) describes as an upturn in realism, which has further developed in subsequent iterations rendering both forms of subjective and systemic violence more palpable, with acts of unchecked violence and graphic scenes of sex (ibid) juxtaposed against more prosocial behaviour: for example, Welsh (2006) identifies 'cruising for leisure' in this regard. Calls towards banning the franchise at this time (see Finn 2006) have moved towards an increasingly histrionic political discourse that extends today to Donald Trump's presidency, where video games are considered the catalyst for recent school shootings (Ducharme 2018).

Alongside popular opinion on the nature of violence in video games, there is sustained debate in psychology around causal links between games and subjective violence (see Dominick 1984 and Schutte et al 1988), which has spanned far into the 21st century (see Anderson and Bushman 2001; Peng, Liu and Mou, 2008; Weber, Behr and Tamborini 2009; Shaw, Crosby & Porter 2014) following Dill & Dill's earlier suggestion of a 'need for more research' (1998:407).

Social scientists have moved towards researching violence as it is experienced 'in-play'. Contributions to this field include Smith et al's (2003) work on the frequency and repetition of violence in video games, Schott (2008) on the 'pleasure' attached to in-game violence, and importantly, Ribbens and Malliet (2015) on how meaning is made both in and through violent playable choices and actions.

We argue that a bridging point in understanding systemic violence can be found in Atkinson and Willis' (2007) 'ludodrome' argument, where simulated and real spaces are interrelated, as 'real space may be suffused with elements of simulated space and the blending of […] popular culture' (820). Following this, Rodgers (2014) on deviant play and Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) on virtual zones of exception help to reanimate Presdee's (2000) thoughts on 'carnivalesque' experiences towards virtual spaces, an idiom also seen in Annandale's (2006) *The Subversive Carnival of Grand Theft Auto*.

To expand on this, Atkinson and Rodgers attest that subversive, hedonistic cultures which routinely subjugate women, including violent pornography or video games, reflect broader shifts towards a contemporary consumer culture of leisure and instant gratification. They argue that these themes '[tell] 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' (2016:1302). This is presented as a two-way street, with the authors advocating for 'scoping analyses of the ways in which hegemonic norms and values are reproduced through the scripts and assumptions of many games' (ibid:1302). The implication of this is that whilst games reflect the values of our culture, in turn, they also have a role in developing, nuancing, and reinforcing them. Building on this, our approach is to think through how these violences are *played*, bearing in mind the interrelationship between the construction of the game and player interaction.

Our contention is that other forms of violence in video games beyond the subjective have been somewhat neglected: here we will consider the relationship between race, representations in popular culture and harm. A good starting point in this regard includes Leonard's (2006) discussion of 'virtual gangsters' which investigates racialised themes in the GTA series, taking a comparative approach between real-world and virtual discourses. Leonard, citing bell hooks' *Outlaw Culture,* describes conversations around game practices as the 'pimping of a corporate ghettocentric imagination' (Leonard 2006:50) that contains strong themes of hedonistic consumerism and sexualised violent refrains, thereby 'legitimising a conservative project that maintains a permanent underclass' (ibid) in discourses around gaming and beyond. For us, understanding these deep-rooted themes of class stereotyping, the sexualisation of women and the perpetuation of a 'ghettocentric' racial

imagination – or indeed other forms of 'systemic violence' – is a clear next step for sociologists of deviance.

Furthermore, on race representation and social division in GTA, DeVane and Squire (2008) find that whilst negative racial stereotypes are present in the game, players are not passive in the way that they receive these messages – and produce their own meanings around controversial issues in their play practice. This is foreshadowed by Frasca (2003), and Juul (2005), who attest that the vastness of the albeit divisive urban playscape affords the player increased freedom to impose their own moral position. This is crucial as any foray into the systemic violence portrayed in games will also need to consider Sicart's idiom that 'a computer game is […] a moral object that is actualized by a moral agent' (2009:63). This clear distinction between player and game, where the game space lacks neutrality but the player brings an ethical position along with them, will in the first instance necessitate a methodology that can account for both[1]. In the second, it reinforces the importance of player-game interaction in how players 'experience place' (Bogost & Klainbaum 2006) rather than considering games in isolation.

Redmond (2006:104) has written of the 'devastatingly accurate sense of humour' and 'uproarious satire' that allows for GTA's 'nightmarish political regression' to be affected with such resolve. In fact, much of GTA's representational space (Lefebvre 1991) comes in the form of pastiche, satire and subversion (Redmond 2006). GTA, and it's 'innovative approach to narrative in relation to space' (Whalen 2006:143), is a good place to start when investigating how systemic inequalities are represented in gameplay. But 'showing a world is very different from making it playable' (Redmond 2006:106), so close attention needs to be paid to the affective power of playing in game space.

With that in mind, in researching this sort of interaction before the advent of video games, Huizinga (1949:46) found that 'culture arises in the form of play, it is played from the very beginning', giving levity to Atkinson and Rodgers' (2016:1302) claim that researching games tells us something about our culture. Directly addressing *GTAV* through a textual analysis, Maloney (2016) finds that rewarding players for acts of subjective violence furthers a sort of 'ambivalence' where violence becomes normalised. But he also calls upon an ambient ambivalence of narrative that embeds violence implicitly into the background of gameplay – systemic violences can be found in elements of gaming as straightforward as competitiveness. Maloney goes on to argue that games with a more open-world narrative see this in a more 'fractured' way, which feeds into Saklofske's (2007) contribution that draws attention to decentralised media spaces, and their varying enablement of player agency and responsibility. Further to this, Latorre (2015), argues that the 'ludic design' of the games themselves and the social discourses that they privilege can influence player agency, and the messages we take from play.

Our focus in this paper then is on some of these latent forms of systemic violence, which Žižek (2009) defines as 'invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against

[1] See section 3, Method.

which we perceive something as subjectively violent' (2), where subjective (or 'interpersonal') violence is caused and influenced by this 'invisible background of systemic violence' (8). In other words, we investigate the ways in which systemic violences in gameplay surround, produce and contextualise players' perceptions of violent play. These can include the gendered or heteronormative rhetoric written about by DeVane and Squire (2008) or Atkinson and Rodgers (2016). But in this paper we find our focus in 'ghettocentric', corporate, capitalistic and classist (Leonard 2006:50) play choices that our participants repeatedly cite as 'realistic', framed in *GTAV's* playable sandpit of consumer capitalism and its recreation of violently realistic urban life. In the interest of being specific, we witness these violences in the game's explicit focus on accruing financial wealth (which we expand in the first of two data sections), our participants gameplay choices that aired towards purchasing, and in their understanding of the intersectionality between class and race (which we expand in the second of two data sections).

Method

Before us, researchers have used semi or unstructured interviews to understand violence in gameplay (see, for example, Atkinson and Willis 2007; DeVane and Squire 2008). Building on this, we have developed our approach of 'interactive elicitation', which brings the gameplay into the interview by staging the semi-structured questioning and splitting it so that half takes place during the gameplay, and half immediately after. As Sommerseth argues (2007: 765) 'realism in video games is dependent on the player's embodied experience of play as opposed to mimetic representation', so when interrogating this concept, our empirically rigorous, embodied approach effectively combines interviews with the experience of play as it occurs. We further expand on our approach elsewhere (AUTHOR & AUTHOR 2019) and it is useful to consider our critical appraisal of its benefits, such as reducing recall bias, weighted against some drawbacks, like social desirability bias (Nederhof 1985), which we argue are necessary for capturing the social aspects of play (Huizinga 1949).

Interactive elicitation sessions consisted of a one and a half-hour structured-play session. For the first half-hour, participants could play freely, familiarising themselves with the controls on our game and console of choice (*GTAV* on PlayStation 4) before the audio-recording began. For the second half-hour, participants engaged with the open world of Los Santos, a fictional version of Los Angeles, California. Participants started as the first playable character, Franklin, stood outside the house of the second playable character, Michael: inside the house there is the start to a mission, 'Mr Philips', where participants would have to play as the third and final character, a sociopathic methamphetamine dealer called 'Trevor'. At this point, participants were given the identical instruction to 'play as you would usually play', and their gameplay was discussed in real-time, asking them to narrate and explain their play to us. The final half-hour was a more traditional semi-structured interview, with participants asked a series of open-ended prompts such as 'was it fun?' and 'what are the rules?' which ranged in topic including characterisation, space and narrative.

Earlier studies of gamers in this sort of context have tended to skew towards majority male participants (see Schott 2008): of our fifteen participants, nine were male and six were female. An adapted version of opportunity sampling was used to identify and recruit participants (Jupp, 2006; Kemper, Stringfield and Teddy 2003) between January and March 2018. They are anonymised as **P1**-**P15**, and range in age from eighteen to twenty-eight: in this our aim was to address Schott's argument that 'young peoples' voices have been considered irrelevant or unreliable when thinking about screen-mediated violence.

Participants were undergraduate students at university in England, some with prior experience of gaming, some without, and some having played *GTAV* before as well. Being British, our participants occupy a dual position of having familiarity with the systemically violent tropes that we analyse in this paper through their lives in a Western capitalist economy and, moreso, their consumption of Americanised popular culture. But they also possess a critical distance from the virtual city of Los Santos which is a distinctly American space seen in everything from the music that is played on car radios to the need to purchase healthcare. From this standpoint it will be important to reflect on our participants' unique perspective and what it can tell us about globalised consumer culture.

Data were analysed thematically (Boyatzis 1998), using Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybridized inductive and deductive coding. Players 1; 7; 5; 10; 12 and 14 did not follow the 'Mr Philips' mission. Players 2; 3; 4; 8; 9; 11; 13 and 15 mixed their gameplay time between the mission and free-play. Player 6 completed the mission and used the rest of their time to see how many more they could do. In the following section, we delve into themes of systemic violence through the presence of capitalistic game frameworks and playable choices both inside and out of the structured mission(s).

Climbing the 'Capitalist Monster'

Following Galtung's (1969:171) suggestion that structural violence emerges when 'resources are unevenly distributed [and] […] income distribution are heavily skewed', this subsection will demonstrate these qualities inside of the broader context of capitalistic play that is present in GTA, underpinning both the main gameplay narrative as well as the functionality of open-world play. **P11**'s summary of this system is succinct:

> **P11** the majority of it is it's people just trying to kind of climb their way up the capitalist monster, I would say

P11's reference to the 'the capitalist monster' in describing the primary objectives of the game's playable characters essentialises the predatory qualities of global capitalism; the ceaseless drive toward the accumulation of surplus value is likened to a confrontation with a towering, impervious behemoth. Žižek (2009:10) employs similar language in positioning systemic violence within the contours of the aggressive expansion of capital. He writes that capitalism is a 'self-engendering monster that pursues its path disregarding any human or environmental concern', an analogism which reflects systems of violence present when

players advance their avatars' positions from the bottom of the financial ladder toward greater affluence within the game's society. **P12** further explains that the narrative for Franklin – the stereotype of a low-status, urban black criminal – is to eventually become rich with property and conspicuous consumption:

> **P12** [what's the plot?] Well, with Franklin it would be kind of a small criminal becoming a millionaire, because he gets really rich from it, and being able to buy all the stuff he wouldn't have been able to. You begin as a small character and end up as a rich person. […] Yeah, American dream.

Video games have been criticised for their privileging of subjective, interpersonal violence as a mechanism for winning and progressing through the story arc, and defeating enemies with violence has been part of video games since their inception. In Space Invaders, players defeat advancing UFOs with laser beams; in Super Mario Brothers, the titular characters kill small sentient mushrooms – 'Goombas' – by jumping on their heads. When the plot of a game is to defeat an opponent and progress as a character, it can be quite difficult to imagine a way in which this can be done *without* interpersonal violence. What makes GTA's player arc interesting is that it offers, and to a degree requires, players to engage in both the expected subjective violence *and* systemic violence as part of its narrative of progression, which is a reinterpretation of how violence can be used as a device for successive gameplay.

Often, participants would acknowledge the existence of a second mode of violent play through references to violent spaces. *GTAV* is a vast open-world playable space ranging from urban inner-city, to consumeristic beach-front arcades, to idyllic mountainous vistas, as well as run-down rural wastelands with a trailer-park feel. In these spaces, participants saw notable differences in playable actions, game mechanics and computer-generated NPCs[2] that married neatly with established stereotypes of class, race, and attitudes towards capital accumulation. **P4** begins by complimenting the developer's attention to detail and willingness to confront such difficult themes:

> **P4** I did like that sort of Americana feel of the trailer park and then that sort of desert area. I think that's sort of that white poverty is sort of maybe something that America doesn't particularly like to deal with in a wider sense. I think it was quite well construed there.

> **P11** [on Michael] He's going to be wealthy because I've never seen gated communities on GTA before.

[2] NPCs (non-playable characters) are in-game characters that the player cannot control. Their dialogue and actions are often scripted and pre-determined by the game's developers, though the player can sometimes interact with these characters.

GTAV is complimented for showing both white-wealth and white-poverty as it is stereotypically understood in the popular imagination: financially articulated and culturally divided. **P4's** praise for the developer's bravery in tackling such a difficult theme as trailer-park deprivation is mirrored neatly against **P11's** more critical insight. They see the game as playing into these stereotypes, rather than engaging with them critically, in order to orient the player inside of this culturally imagined poverty using the player's 'transgressive imagination' (O'Neill & Seal 2012) to ground them inside of the 'segregated enclavism' (Atkinson & Blandy 2006) that peppers the modern urban landscape. This urban segregation was as visible linguistically as well as spatially, with **P11** discussing how these two themes are systemically entangled:

> **P11** I don't know but from the amount of swearing from his friends and the fact that he lived in quite a run down house I'd say he's quite hard done by maybe. And it's a GTA world so you can do missions to get money so he's going to be motivated to get a better life.

Verbal confrontation routinely comes unbidden in *GTAV*, serving the function of provoking players into violent play where nonviolent play would be equally possible (AUTHOR AND AUTHOR 2018). But **P11** sees a second purpose, to make visible the poverty that contextualises Franklin's character. In the process, the player's avatar – beginning his climb up the capitalist monster – is positioned in a believable space where their behaviour is contextually warranted, thereby reifying the sort of unabated violence that takes place in the game (Atkinson & Rodgers 2016). This can be understood as playing upon one of Žižek's (2009) objective violences – the symbolic – to make real the subjective interpersonal violences of the players. For Žižek, violence is embedded in language in all of its forms, which imposes a 'certain universe of meaning' (1): in this instance, on the player. The result is that violent play is reinforced through a sense of plausibility, grounding the characters as those who we should expect to behave in certain ways:

> **P9** I'd say Franklin is quite believable like how like somebody grows up in a shitty area. He wants to make money and the only way to do it is getting it through illegitimate means.

Because of this contextualisation of character and place through established systemic and symbolic violences, **P9** accepts that Franklin will strive for more money and status, and should do so through subjective violence, or 'illegitimate means', evoking language used in Merton's (1938) theory of 'strain'. In its reverse, this manifests in the perception of the game's victims as well as its criminals:

> **P13** That's why when I got out the car I saw that the woman was dressed quite nicely so I just went to go and punch her and I think I shot her and then I got money but it

wasn't that much.[…] The more nice people are dressed and the more rich they look the more money comes out of them.

P14 [You've killed about four homeless people and it hasn't increased your wantedness[3]] I know. They don't give a shit.

P13 is aware that the people who look wealthy are wealthier and that prioritising them as targets will help her earn cash much faster. **P14**, on the other hand, recognises that killing homeless people in the game does not trigger the police chasing you as quickly as those wealthier people, as though the game factors in variance of financial incentive and acknowledges it with a different level of difficulty. These embedded structural violences are present in place and narrative, as we have shown, but they are also 'played' inside of the game's plot arc and its NPCs.

Dying is a potential outcome in most games that is dealt with in both the game mechanics and through player agency. Our participants, all British, found their interactions with *GTAV's* take on the American private healthcare system noteworthy:

P12 But it is like it is in real life as well, like whatever you do you have to pay for it. Like if you do get caught by the police you have to pay for it. You go to hospital and stuff like that.

P6 [on hospital bills and bail] it must be like a percentage of the maximum you have.

Despite this system differing from what they are used to in the United Kingdom, **P12** does not find it unusual that, in this computerised world, you are expected to pay out of pocket for whatever costs your character might incur, including healthcare and bail. This is not usual in the sense that it is not what they would experience in everyday life, but it adds to the game's sense of realism by engaging with capitalistic structures that reify violence. **P6** reminds us that this financial cost must be tamed in order for it to work on a technical level with the game only able to extract a percentage of what the player has. A more realistic system, with flat rates of payment for hospital care, would limit the players' freedom and disincentivise risky, violent play.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which these capitalistic ideals can be played is through in-game shopping and character personalisation, which was a theme that permeated all fifteen interviews and some of the pre-interview gameplay sessions as well:

[3] 'Wantedness' is a measure of the extent to which a player's avatar is 'wanted' by the police or army. In *GTAV,* this is measured incrementally from zero to five using on-screen 'stars' resembling police badges. A wanted rating of zero stars indicates that the avatar is not being pursued, while a wanted rating of five stars suggests that the player is being actively pursued. The latter is evidenced through the greater presence of police vehicles programmed to 'apprehend' - in this case, kill - the player's avatar.

> **P14** You get to change clothes, change the hair, change weapons depending on what guns you like. The ones I liked are the shotgun.
>
> **P9** you obviously customise their appearance and stuff. I always have Trevor with either the homeless sort of hair and the big massive beard and just a pair of trackies, like he starts off with.

P14 is more enthusiastic about customisation than **P9**. Clothes, body type (in terms of fitness, by attending the gym), hair style, tattoos (which are removable should you grow bored) and weaponry can all be customised in *GTAV*. This represents a noted trend in consumption and identity construction towards privileging small, trivial differences in products to manufacture a sense of difference (Lash and Lury 2007). Whilst these purchasing choices certainly are trivial in the sense that they do not influence player progression, they are used in line with the game's embedded structural violences to further a capitalistic, hegemonic hierarchy for the player to progress through. Despite relative affordability, these customisable options and purchasing choices are not free from association with class, race, gender and wealth. Particular styles of clothes, for example, are required to be purchased for certain missions: you cannot blend in at the trailer park in a crisp, black, suit. **P12** notes this when referring to cars:

> **P12** [on cars] because I assume the big one like that would be for more rich people and it would be more able to control it maybe. Because that crappy one I had last, you could not break it you had to wait for it to slow down before you could turn.

P12 feels that the larger cars must be more expensive, must contain wealthy people, and be easier to control for a novice player. **P12** has not played the game long enough to know if this is true across the spectrum of cars in *GTAV*, and this quote represents a two-way street between player and game where the expectations of the former interact with the sort of liquid consumption (Bauman 2007) of the latter to forge a reciprocal embracement of the capitalistic, carnivalesque space that the game has been refered to (Atkinson & Rodgers 2016). Ultimately, what this commitment to structural violence as consumerism, with racial and class-based stereotypes does is to affect, and enhance, the game's sense of realism, situating subjective violence inside of a framework that makes sense to players, which we discuss in the next section.

The Real

Participants questioned the game's mechanics as unrealistic but cited these themes of systemic violence as providing the sense of gritty, urban, 'ghettocentric' (Leonard 2006:50) realism that makes the game playable. This dualism around realism, where participants separated the reality of gameplay from the 'real' environment or the 'spectral logic of capital'

(Žižek 2009:11), began by their critique of its programming, in contrast with the praise for developers discussed earlier:

> **P9** I remember when I was younger and I was playing this and you can just go straight through lampposts and stuff. I thought you could actually do that in a [real] car but then like I saw a car wrapped around one once and I was just like, ahh, okay GTA isn't realistic.
>
> **P12** [On lack of realism] Just being shot and stuff and you survive. Jumping out of helicopters and you just go to the hospital and they do you up.

In the first instance, **P9** reveals their naivety as a child viewing earlier iterations of the *GTA* franchise, being fooled into thinking that one could drive through lampposts because of the game's often liberal physics. Small hedges, on the other hand, were highlighted as strangely impenetrable. **P12**'s comment is less of a criticism, establishing that being able to revive already fatally-wounded avatars is necessary to make a violent game playable. Schwartz (2006:315) tells us that 'realism and detail allow gamers to accept game spaces as "real" and visit them as tourists' – but exactly what this 'realism and detail' are and how they allow players to accept the space as 'real', is unclear. Krcmar et al (2011) found that participants playing a later, more graphically accurate version of the same franchise (*Doom 1* vs. *Doom 3*) perceived a higher level of graphic realism but our participants' critique of the game's graphics suggested that this was not the most important factor in producing a feeling of the real. Whilst these elements were highlighted as lacking realism throughout the fifteen interviews, a sense of the capitalistic 'real' prevailed:

> **P15** But then you can… like I was going to go on the Ferris wheel because then that's like a realistic part of life or getting your hair cut or changing your clothes and stuff.
>
> **P4** [what's realistic?] I think the more passive things, like I mentioned the shopping […] are probably the more realistic things. I think it's based on sort of this transaction that's, you know, we've all bought clothes and, you know what I mean, as simple as it sounds we've all had that purchase.

P15 cites three elements of the game that the player can purchase as its most real qualities. **P4** does the same, mentioning clothing purchases once again. But **P4**'s insight adds nuance, identifying the embedded transactional nature of capitalism, where everything must be earned, fought for, bought or traded. They go as far as to highlight them as 'passive', the opposite of 'active', evoking a distinction between subjective/interpersonal and systemic/structural violence. Here. the transactional nature of *GTAV* represents systemic violence combed into the background. This sense of the real being accessed via the systemic

violence of capital and consumption is perhaps best articulated in their comments on personalisation, part of the modern logic of the global culture industry (Lash & Lury 2007).

> **P4** I think it adds more depth to the characters I think because you can personalise each one. […] I think maybe it appeases perhaps the more violent side as well like making it a bit more normal from like, you know.

Consuming identity through personalisation is a well-established understanding of how the culture industry operates in the modern, capitalistic West (Bauman 2007; Lash & Lury 2007). Isbister (2013) argues that costumes in games can contribute to a sense of realism through the ability to personalise. **P4** acknowledges this in terms of 'depth', but then draws out the idea that this context might be 'appeasing' the more obvious themes of interpersonal violence in the game, making them more playable by situating them inside of an environment where they feel quite normal. Moreover, an environment filled with racial, sexist and classist stereotypes, alongside rampant consumerism and a requirement for unabated capital accumulation, is one where shooting and killing seems plausible. Our participants understanding that this game is set in the United States does not assuage that perception:

> **P14** I think the only really realistic things are you can go to the cinema, get your hair cut. They're like the realistic things. And obviously it's American so you can go to like gun places and learn to shoot and stuff. I mean, the whole running people over is technically realistic if you were a maniac.

> **P10** Out of all of them it's the most realistic as if you can go to places like shops and stuff and steal from them. The characters are quite like real looking-ish. And just like how you can obviously just grab someone out of the car sort of thing.

P14 furthers previous comments on consumptive realism by including purchasing guns and paying to attend shooting ranges inside of their critique of American culture. The fact that this game is essentially 'American' is what makes these forms of consumption around violence believable for this player. Both **P14** and **P10** conclude by contrasting those participants who detracted from the realism of the game's mechanics. The programming of hedges and lampposts lacks realism, but the fact that one can run someone over, or drag them from their car, is decidedly realistic inside of the violent-capitalistic play-space of *GTAV*, despite participants not experiencing these events in their daily lives (or happening routinely in actual Los Angeles [Romero 2016]). Similarly, **P10** adds to the idea that interpersonal violence can be normalised inside of a framework where it is expected, citing the presence of shops – and how, logically, it makes sense that one can steal from them. They follow this statement by doubling-down on the characters seeming 'real looking-ish': here they are referring to their realness in the context of people they might expect to commit those acts. **P12** puts this more succinctly:

> **P12** [on realism of characters] They're extremes of stereotypes.
>
> **P11** [on racial stereotypes] I'd understand one or two because they're trying to make it gritty and realistic but then it's just a bit overkill. […] I don't know if it is or it isn't [exaggerated] because I've never been in a rough neighbourhood and I've never really been around people that use that word so I wouldn't know.

P11 elaborates on these stereotypes, particularly in the context of race, expressly stating that they serve the purpose of making the game 'gritty and realistic'. They draw upon a particular racial slur, conceding that they cannot be sure if this is realistic or not due to not having visited that place – only that a sense of the real can be enhanced through certain systemically violent stereotypes. They continue their comments on slurs and curse words, moving away from racism and into poverty, deprivation and class:

> **P11** [Swearing exists] probably just to show you that it's a poor area maybe. Just to go with Franklin's friends swearing and stuff. […] I wouldn't say [swearing exists to highlight class] conflict; I'd just say 'to create the environment so you feel like it's more real'.
>
> **P13** [On urban inequality represented in GTAV]: I think that's actually how it is.

By revisiting **P11**'s comments on swearing, it is possible to see how, in this instance, it is the interplay between systemic and symbolic violence that draws out perceptions of both real violence and violent realism. **P11** does not credit the game with a moral conscience, or give developers credit for trying to highlight a classed conflict that is clearly present inside of this fictional urban space, just as it is present in the non-fictional urban L.A. Rather, they see it as a device to draw out the real. Such a thing exists, so its presence is required to convincingly contextualise the type of violence that this game privileges. Ultimately, this is clearest in **P13**'s comment and the permeating sensation that 'that's actually how it is'. In response to our closing questions – 'would you like to live in Los Santos', followed by 'would you like to live in Los Angeles?' – participants reinforced how the fictional 'ghettocentric' space might stack up against the real:

> **P1** There probably isn't that much of a difference [between L.A. and Los Santos]. Probably there is places like Los Santos in Los Angeles but it's not as, I don't know, people don't show it as much as the like nice bits of L.A. Because I'm sure there's sketchy bits and people get shot all the time.

> **P9** [T]hey do a good job of painting the picture of a city. And on the radio they have adverts and stuff. […] One of my favourite things is there was an advert for a film or something on the radio and they said that's rated PS for pretty stupid. That was cool.

The capitalistic 'real' leaves our participants with the impression that Los Santos is an accurate representation of urban America. **P1**, despite pointing out that the nicer parts of L.A. do not seem to be represented inside of Los Santos, still recognises the 'sketchy' nature of the virtual space as mapping onto similar real-world environs. **P9** does the same, before immediately calling on the apparent biting satire of capitalism that the GTA franchise is famous for: even background design choices such as radio advertisements offer an often-sarcastic sales-pitch for a variety of fictional products. In response to the same question, other participants called-back to this on-the-nose sendup of American life, here in the context of the criminal justice system:

> **P11** I could go over [to the U.S.A.] and do the same thing as a black person but they would get shot for it and I wouldn't. I don't want to be part of that system, like even if I'm just visiting.

> **P12** I think there was a bit where the police just shouted 'die' trying to kill us. I think that's a bit… I know obviously it's a game but it doesn't help when you have all this stuff in America with all the police having a bad image for just like shooting people really.

GTAV and its myriad forms of stereotyping has contributed to **P11**'s impression that life in the U.S.A. for black people is fraught with additional risks when encountering the police. In the context of comparing the virtual space against the real, they identify the systemic violence of institutional racism as a shared quality between Los Santos and Los Angeles. **P12**, on the other hand, sees *GTAV*'s rendition as a little over-egged, but doubles down on its perceived likeness to Los Angeles by telling us that broaching such a contentious topic is not helping America's image in such a difficult time for their criminal justice system and its reputation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The significance of our findings can be best understood in relation to relevant studies of similar types of violence, particularly with regards to the relationship between realism and the real, routinely framed through race. The contestation between the two is present in a number of ways. Firstly, as Schwarz argued earlier, 'realism and detail allow gamers to accept game spaces as "real" and visit them as tourists' (2006:315) but as we have illustrated, defining what realism is in virtual space and how it operates to inform and create a sense of the 'real' is unclear. This finding, which foregrounds a more complex interpretive framing of the 'real', does not exist in isolation: Malliet (2006), for instance, developed a six-fold typology of game realism which also struggled to sufficiently represent a multitude of participants'

interpretations of a believable game space. In our data, the visual persuasiveness of the space was less important to participants in engendering a sense of the real than feelings of authenticity typified through the availability of choices a player could make within the open-world of Los Santos. Contributing to this sense of authenticity was the impact of 'social realism', which our participants experienced through representations of the spectral logic of capital.

As we identified at the start of this paper, discussions of realism in gaming have acknowledged links with violence but frequently through the prism of subjective interpersonal forms of harm. Tamborini (et al 2013:110) found that 'actions were percieved as more violent if they were also percieved as less justified', but this idiom, when flipped, can be applied neatly to systemic violence as well. Due to the persistent and embedded nature of structural violece, participants took for granted the harms inherent in capitalistic play, interpreting these harms as a justified progressive pathway through the game. Therefore a preoccupation with subjective violence, both amongst players and critics of violence in video games, disregards the relationship between subjective and systemic violence. Ignoring or at best downplaying systemic violence echoes Marx's (1978:250) argument that forms of direct exploitation, such as slavery, often serve as justification for indirect coercion (e.g. wage labour). Expressions of abhorrence toward direct violence often legitimate structures of domination resulting in harm and the diminishment of potential realisations. Structural violence does not exist simply in parallel with subjective violence, but as its corollary in a 'relation of domination' (ibid: 250) which requires more thorough scrutiny in the context of video games.

Our data also show that whilst graphic realism is eschewed by players, structural forms of violence are seductive in their ability to contribute to the players' sense of being 'actually there'. This corroborates Jun Jeong, Biocca & Bohil's (2012) work on graphic realism, which found that having realistic blood colour and screaming turned on showed no significant effect on player aggression, but 'presence' – the immersive experience of being 'actually there' – did. This perception of the real has been described in previous games research as 'immersion' which is 'recognised as an important element of good games. However, 'it is not always clear what is meant by immersion' (Cheng & Cairns 2005:1272). We would argue that immersion in *GTAV* is most convincingly maintained not by visual representation, but through the game's narrative embodiment of the 'real', replete with struggle and capitalistic harm(s).

Another key finding from our data is the way in which fantasy and reality intertwine to create a sense of the real, with our participants accepting the fantasy world of *GTA* as realistic due to the real, spectral logic of capital in which its narrative sits. This combination of fantastical and realistic in *GTAV* shows clear parallels with Schwartz's (2006:316) earlier work on the franchise which found that:

> 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? With the incorporation of both elements, players are able to accept the fantasy as part of the game reality.

Ultimately, what we have found in the preceding data illuminates participants' distinctions 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 forms of liquid consumption, capitalistic progression, and embedded racial 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 general consensus amongst participants that *GTAV* featured a convincing narrative embodiment of the 'real'. We can unpack this distinction through Žižek's (2009:11) dichotomy of 'reality' versus the 'Real':

> '[Systemic] violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but is purely "objective", systemic, anonymous. Here we encounter the Lacanian difference between reality and the Real: "reality" is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable "abstract", spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality. […] [R]eality doesn't matter, what matters is the situation of capital'

Žižek's interpretation of Lacan facilitates an understanding of what participants allude to in our first and second data sections. In *Climbing the Capitalist Monster*, we showed how the game's playable processes and free, open-world structure are set up to operationalise through play the competitive logic of capital, and in *The Real*, we showed how participants map this underpinning 'spectral', ghost-like logic of capital onto the game as an interpretation of its legitimacy as the 'real', in opposition to the flawed 'reality' of impenetrable hedges or flimsy lampposts.

For Galtung (1969), similarly, violence occurs when there exists a disparity between 'potential' and 'actual' realisations of physical and mental wellbeing, separate and distinct from interpersonal violence. Interpersonal violence, like shooting and killing in the game, could result from, or result in, this gap but this gap is also visible purely structurally, for example, when access to healthcare is limited by a lack of money. At that point, the potential for sound bodily health is impeded and diminished opportunity to receive medical attention has led to an actualisation of illness or poor physical wellbeing. Galtung (1969:168) writes:

> If a person died from tuberculosis in the eighteenth century it would be hard to conceive of this as violence since it might have been quite unavoidable, but if he dies from it today, despite all the medical resources in the world, then violence is present according to our definition.

Our participants' voices on the US healthcare system in *GTAV* fit neatly with Galtung's example; players are required to prosper, and to pay financially for their avatar's welfare. But Galtung's notion of structural violence extends far beyond this illustration in *GTAV*, with game progression centred around the closing of the gap between potential and actual realisations of wellbeing, described by one participant as 'climbing the capitalist monster'.

Previously (AUTHOR & AUTHOR) we have shown that, when presented with the opportunity for interpersonal violence in an open-world game, many participants still opt to avoid shooting and killing in favour of consumptive play, and that disproportionate attention paid to playable interpersonal violence is misguided. Here, we contend that the least visible violences that fall into the background of consumptive play are taken for granted by players as the provider of the 'real', and that the very fact that they are experienced as 'real' where interpersonal violence is received more critically, should cement them as our forerunning concern in cultural criminology.

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