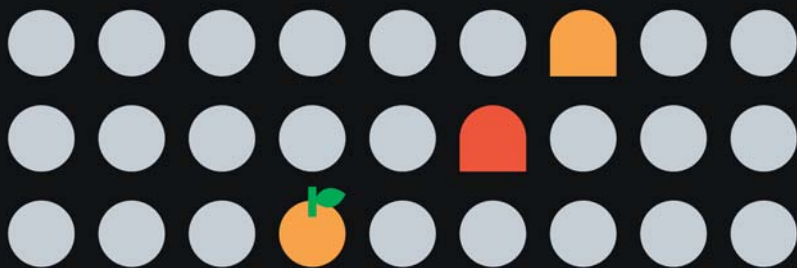




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VIDEO GAMES, CRIME AND NEXT-GEN DEVIANCE

Reorienting the Debate

Craig Kelly, Adam Lynes and Kevin Hoffin

Foreword by Professor Rowland Atkinson



EMERALD POINTS

VIDEO GAMES, CRIME
AND NEXT-GEN
DEVIANCE

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Reorienting the Debate

EDITED BY

**CRAIG KELLY, ADAM LYNES,
AND KEVIN HOFFIN**

Birmingham City University, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Dedicated to Charlotte, Lore and Eleanor

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FOREWORD: CLIMAX CULTURE

The crude idea that violent games directly influence violence outside these worlds is increasingly rejected. Yet, as the contributions in this volume highlight, our concern with the subtle and more complex articulations of harm that flow from game worlds is only just beginning to take shape. As with film, literature and other products of our material culture, video games join with and shape the subjectivities and complex social lives of their many players. Games bed down in both the complex social, economic, political and psychological structures of their times, but they are also products of those conditions. The players of games and the designers of those games are themselves social subjects, keen to experience or produce visceral responses in those walking the spaces they have designed. The companies that publish and develop software, code and new titles are increasingly large organisations with the kind of mercenary motives to make profits and to win their own corporate battles – for hearts, minds and the dollars of players, shareholders and venture capitalist investors. The rules and culture of capitalism are increasingly evident as recent stories highlight practices of tax avoidance and sharp practices that rival the in-game narratives of *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar, 2013). Gold farmers spend time sourcing goods that can be sold, companies embed casino mechanisms into games filled with corporate messages and

systems – advertising, rankings, billboards and social media. Meanwhile the stuff of games themselves has become what some see as a kind of constant creative inertia – more of the same, another *Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2019)*, a slight graphics upgrade here, a new and more sadistic perspective there to draw jaded gamers in. The economy and society loom large in all of these configurations.

As the contributions highlight in diverse and useful ways, the question is not simply one of violence and more a question of how games are situated within a much wider web of harms as these cultural products become part of the contemporary culture. We need to understand the complex pathways of articulation, reception and cultivation of what may be subtly anti-social formations as well as those, more fleeting engagements with little of substance to them. One of the problems of the media effects holy grail in research is its highly psychologised approach which diminishes the complexity, variety and range of social settings and contexts within which such pursuits occur, shape and are deployed by their users. None of this denies the concern we will still have with anti-social, misogynist, blunt sociological models in narrowly defined gameworlds. As I write this, the most popular games are overtly militaristic, para-nationalist and unremittingly violent games whose ‘social’ content has if anything reduced some claim to narrative and good storytelling. *Fragging all round*. But also there a farming simulator (*Focus Home Interactive, 2019*), various Lego games (*Interactive Entertainment, 2017, 2019*), *Minecraft (Mojang, 2009)* and several delightful if derivative Nintendo games. Like drivers who are also pedestrians and cyclists, many gamers match mood and time with particular titles and the sense that a genuinely anti-social force is pervasive needs to be tempered.

The thesis of Kelly, Lynes and Hoffin that we are diverted from wider and multiple harms by a simplistic interest in

direct violence is a valuable one. Indeed, we, our societies and polities, remain significant producers of violence through our neglect (and direct promotion of) of the deeper causes of violence, structural conditions, family violence and weakening community structures. Yet a focus on games and gaming continues to provide a useful scapegoat. Even so we can recognise that these leisure forms may have harmful impacts while being subtly woven into a culture fixed on vicariously experiencing violence. *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2019) or *GTA* (Rockstar, 2013) may not induce killing, but a vulnerable or damaged child's maturing moral world can now (whereas in the past it could not) be enveloped in an electively engaged world of bleak media that might include not only violent video games but diverse forms of pornography, celebrity culture, Instagram bodies, mediated bullying and fail videos – a phantasmagoria of images and experiences. The idea that such points of social and technological confluence should not concern us would seem perverse and complacent. The influence of these complex and varied experiences in a less cohesive and more complex and precarious social world remain thought-provoking and important areas for study. What these contributions also focus on is the potentially deepening corrosion of the subject by capitalism that operates through its games as well as through labour, via endless rounds of consumption, immersion and stasis – a kind of apathetic hyperactivity that is now incredibly pervasive.

The pursuit of experiences in a kind of climax culture is everywhere – a focus on the peak moments, the explosive release, an endless repeating of constantly, exploding, perfectly aimed at heads serving as the preparation for competitive, empty, apolitical, corporate staging posts in a modular (or indeed military) life. The harms and effects of games themselves are shaped within variegated worlds and formats – online players cajoling, competing and bullying in

ways that mirror or extend behaviour in playgrounds an hour or two earlier. Complex single player adventures create more or less fascistic ubermenschs whose unassailability makes all into cannon fodder and render all subordinates to the game-driven narrative of a hero or, increasingly, anti-hero. All of this is a long way from Super Mario 64 (Nintendo, 1996), but of course we can also choose to return to such formats, taking joy in non-networked safety, immune from the baiting and exhausting tribal competitions of Fortnite (Epic Games, 2018) or Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2019).

Look away from mass shootings apparently inspired by gameplay, and a more intricate series of connections between a shifting line of deviance and normality revolves around videogame culture and play. A forceful argument that spans the contributions found here is the sense that an inquiring attitude is needed in a world still immature and grappling with what it means to spend time in, to compete (sometimes professionally) and to enjoy or find another form of labour and drudgery in the wide world of games around us. Crime, deviance and harm are inevitably parts of this emerging context. But it is clear that the increasing social content of many games spills out, bleeding into the fabric of the 'real' world in new, complex and sometimes unanticipated ways, inspiring guilt, deviance, pleasure or simply joy. This book is a worthwhile engagement that dials down a reactionary response to games, replacing this with new questions and perspectives constructively engaging with today's ludodromes.

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INTRODUCTION: REORIENTATING THE DEBATE

Craig Kelly, Adam Lynes, and Kevin Hoffin

Video games have become a multi-billion-pound industry, now generating more income than any Hollywood blockbuster (Malim, 2018; Mitic, 2019). Since the early 1990s, the sale of video games has risen dramatically, and thus, as Jones (2008, p. 1) states '*games are arguably the most influential form of popular expression and entertainment in today's broader culture*'. As Hayward (2012) denotes, virtual spaces have an increasing presence within our lived reality. Thus criminology needs to give attention to video games in order for us to fully conceptualise the world we now exist within and the inherent



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symbolic violence (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008). Alongside this, Raymen and Smith (2019) have developed deviant leisure as a strand of criminology which propositions social scientists to increasingly consider how contemporary forms of leisure can manifest or include forms of deviancy.

Before introducing some of the main arguments put forward in this book, it is first important to provide brief yet vital definitions. Deviant leisure, the conceptual 'toolkit' vital in the framing for the subsequent chapters, may conjure particular images of well-known and traditional acts of deviancy (for example, certain forms of clothing linked to subcultures; certain forms of tattoos; loitering). However, this more 'traditional' definition of deviancy is rather narrow in scope and omits a range of potential harmful behaviours and activities (Atkinson, 2014). As noted by Atkinson (Atkinson, 2014), the limitations of conventional criminological approaches to understanding the actualities of crime and deviance are displayed -when Stan Cohen posed three simple questions:

The stuff of criminology consists of only three questions: Why are laws made? Why are they broken? What do we do or what should we do about this?

(Cohen, 1998, p. 9).

In posing these relatively straightforward questions, Cohen was highlighting the shortcomings of criminology as a discipline. Specifically, he highlights that such questions are (usually) posed by those with authority within criminal justice and crime control agencies. So too, there is an inherent shortsightedness with regard to the realities and complexities that create and perpetuate the conditions that often result in criminal behaviour. In order for us to break free of this restrained and misguided questions, we need to move beyond

such orthodox notions and draw upon more critical and contemporary perspectives. Deviant leisure, as proposed by Oliver Smith and Tom Raymen, attempted to provide such solutions by drawing upon contemporary paradigms including ultrarealism and more modern critical strains of cultural criminology. In defining this new perspective, [Smith \(2016\)](#) – aware of the inherent restraints of criminology – posits that

‘deviant leisure’ began to orient itself toward a reconceptualisation of social deviance and an exploration of how individual, social, economic, and environmental harms are structurally and culturally embedded within many accepted and normalized forms of leisure, asserting that criminologists need to travel beyond the boundaries associated with more traditional socio-legal constructions of crime and into the realm of harm and zemiology

([Smith, 2016](#), p. 6).

Taking this quote into consideration, along with the previously discussed orthodox notions of deviance, a deviant leisure perspective seeks to articulate a more nuanced interpretation. One which is better suited to contemporary application was designed to ‘capture’ and deduce a wider range of harms that criminology is otherwise incapable of determining. Along with drawing upon more critical strands of criminology better suited for the realities of 21st century life, deviant leisure also puts zemiology to the fore. Zemiology, similar to the rationale behind deviant leisure, was inspired by the notion that much of criminology and relevant research is conducted, produced and maintained by ‘very powerful interests, not least the state, which produces definitions of crime through criminal law’ ([Hillyard & Tombs, 2017](#), p. 284). Again, such a perspective is crucial in transcending the

preverbal cage in which many within academia and wider society unwittingly find themselves within, unable or inhibited from perceiving notions of harm outside of the traditional notion which is constrained via legal frameworks. To summarise this brief introduction to deviant leisure, such a perspective seeks to uncover those behaviours that within a more ethical social order would be seen as the harmful acts that they actually are. More specifically, as a growing assortment of forms of 'deviant leisure' become culturally entrenched within the conventional and their associated harms become regularised, 'deviant leisure scholars argue that the usual focus of criminology on legally defined crime and forms of deviance which controvert social norms and values requires some conceptual expansion (Smith, 2016, p. 10).

The following book stems from the aforementioned points as well as a short blog written by the editors in June of 2018 for the British Society of Criminology. The blog was an exasperated response to various discussions within the mainstream media following the tragic school shooting in Santa Fe High School in Texas. The blog put forth a short but critical discussion of what the authors view as the myriad and myopic positionality that video games were a mitigating factor in the exponential rise in mass murders across the pond. Crucially, however, it did not hope to just dispel such discussion but to instigate social scientists to progress past such a blinkered view and aide us in identifying, investigating and accounting for various other forms of deviancy we perceived could be identified within video games and the wider industry. The following collection is the product of our supplication, one which we hope will play at least a minor contribution towards two key objectives.

The first is for criminology and wider sociology to possibly offer nuanced understandings of the effect of video games on ever-increasing influence upon society. This being a feat, we

believe only a select few academics have managed to do thus far (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016; Atkinson & Willis, 2007, 2009; Denham & Spokes, 2019). Secondly and most hopefully, this is for wider academia and perhaps most importantly the mainstream media, to finally transition past such basic and wholly inept excuses for the loss of life through abhorrent acts of violence. Of course, by-and-large academia has increasingly progressed past such notions in the last decade, though remnants of such outdated perspectives can still be found.

It seems the media though have not nor have policymakers. As we sit down to write the first draft of the introductory chapter, both the Twittersphere and radio are giving comprehensive coverage of another bloody weekend in the United States. A weekend that, unfortunately, by the time this goes to print and is (hopefully) being read will likely be a distant memory to all but the immediate and secondary victims and of course the first responders.

The first of these shootings was on 3 August 2019 in El Paso, Texas (Beckett & Levin, 2019a). About 48 victims have been confirmed at the time of writing, 22 of which are deceased. This shooting was conducted in a Walmart close to the Cielo Vista Mall. The perpetrator, Patrick Crusius, reportedly drove around 10 hours to El Paso before opening fire on members of the public. Shortly prior to the incident, it is being reported by authorities he uploaded a manifesto online which supposedly cited that the attack was a response of the ‘Hispanic invasion of Texas’ (Beckett & Levin, 2019b). The manifesto was uploaded to the online community 8chan (now 8kun), which has frequently been linked to various acts of fringe movements ranging from far-right ideologues as well as the incel movement (Beckett & Levin, 2019b).

A few hours after the terrorist attack in El Paso, Connor Betts opened fire on a bar in Dayton, Ohio (Sewell & Sewer, 2019). Included within the nine fatalities was the perpetrator’s

sister (Sewell & Seewer, 2019). Another 27 people were reportedly injured. Betts was shot dead during the incident. The shootings at El Paso and Dayton marked the 250th and 251st mass shootings in 2019 (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). A quick (though not comprehensive) scour of the internet details four more mass shooting since aforementioned attack in Dayton, two of which were in Chicago, Illinois, on August 4, with a combined total of 15 victims and one fatality (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). One was in Memphis, Tennessee, with three members of the public injured and one fatality (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). Finally four people were injured in Brooklyn, New York, during a candlelight vigil (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). So far today, there have been no mass shootings reported, though it is only 9:34 a.m. in New York as we type.

Haberman, Karni and Hakim (2019) suggest that perhaps due to his close relationship to and numerous donations from the National Rifle Association, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, again did not condemn the endemic gun culture which is facilitating these devastating acts on such a regular basis (The White House, 2019). Nor did he recognise that the divisive politics which has dogged American politics in recent years may have contributed in any way as influencing any of the shootings. This is not to say that recent sociopolitical changes are the only reason for such atrocities to occur, to propose as such would be ludicrous when accounting for the rise in mass shooting over the previous decades. However, such an approach could lead to some reduction in an otherwise endemic problem which is largely American-centric. It should also be acknowledged that gun-related violence in American schools can be traced back to the 1890s (Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis, 2018).

Whilst disavowing the arguably logical issues which implicate upon the regularity of such actions, President Trump held a press conference in which he offered a five-point plan to

tackle the issue that he terms a '*monstrous evil*' (The White House, 2019). The first priority in the plan was for the authorities to act upon early warning signs much quicker; importantly, he states that such agencies would need to work alongside social media companies (The White House, 2019). Second, Trump stated that the glorification of violence in society must be stopped. He stated that '*This includes the gruesome and grizzly video-games that are now common place*', citing that troubled youths can too easily surround themselves with violent content (The White House, 2019). Third, he proposed furthering mental health support systems as that is '*what pulls the trigger, not the gun*' (The White House, 2019). Forth, he stated extreme risk protection orders should be put in place to ensure access to firearms by dangerous individuals is limited. Finally, he stated that the Department of Justice had been instructed to propose legislation that ensured those committing mass shootings would face the death penalty '*quickly, decisively and without years of needless delay*' (The White House, 2019).

In providing some much needed nuance and evaluation of such political rhetoric, it is important to consider that when it comes to debates on crime and punishment, it is important that we do not simply descend into populist and (supposedly) common sense arguments, built solely on emotion or gut feeling. That is not to deny the place of emotion or common sense, but rather to suggest that sometimes in the social sciences, the evidence and reality might be counterintuitive – what at first appears to be the case may not be, when we look at empirical evidence. Yet the desire to do that seems to be under attack. Recently, on both sides of the Atlantic, political arenas have been transformed into hotbeds of misinformation. What better term to capture this than the contemporary mantra of 'alternative facts', a phrase used by US Counsellor to President Trump, Kellyanne Conway, in a press interview

on 22 January 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the attendance numbers at inauguration (Swaine, 2018).

The first, third and fourth proposal seem at first to be a strong and reasonable rhetoric from a politician dealing with an urgent crisis within their nation. In addition to this, it echoes the notion of *severity, celerity and certainty* embedded within deterrence theory, whilst negating the prevalence of offenders in such situations that commit suicide. The second, however, has almost by necessity become the opening of this book – video games cause violence – a phrase which has been utilised by Trump on numerous occasions previously as well as various politicians before (Draper, 2019). The notion is simply incorrect. This chapter will briefly explore this before the remainder of this book offers possible forms of deviancy that could be cited as attributable or intrinsically linked to the modern video games industry to varying degrees.

There is a long history of emerging forms of media being implicated as having a relationship with violent behaviour since the Victorian era (Schechter, 2005) both within academic studies and media discourse. Such discussions began centred around the increasing literacy of the population and the content they were opting to consume. By the 1950s, Werthem (1954) had professed that rising rates of delinquency were attributable to violent comic books. As with the earlier concerns around literature, the focus upon comics being attributable to society's ills came at a time the comic book market was rapidly gaining momentum (Sabin, 2001). Increasingly through the late 1980s and 1990s, under the Reagan administration, various subgenres of Hip Hop were brought to the fore as causations for youth-related violence (Duggan, 2014). At the same time, artists such as Ice T and groups such as NWA were being blamed for the rise in interpersonal violence in ghettoised areas of America, and

video games were increasingly cited as the reason behind various high-profile crimes (Kocurek, 2019). The game *Doom* (iD Software, 1993) was cited for the murder of a school principal and another student by Evan Ramsey in 1997 (CBS News, 1999). Again, in 1999, *Doom* (iD Software, 1993) was cited as a causal factor for the Columbine Massacre (Kocurek, 2019). Since these early incidents, it is evident that the notion of video games being a casual factor has gained traction not only by the media but also in some cases by the perpetrators of such crimes. Indeed, Evan Ramsey professed in prison (after his trial) that playing *Doom* had been a mitigating factor in his actions (CBS News, 1999). So too, Anders Breivik cited within his manifesto playing *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2007) as a training simulator (Breivik, 2011, p. 908). It should be noted, however, that he also cited *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), a fantasy role-playing game (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004, p. 1380). From this and countless other cases which were cited as having video games as a mitigating factor in violent offending, we can offer that perhaps video games do not cause violence, but media portrayals of that narrative offer to some individuals a technique of neutralisation (Matza, 1964) in which the social scripts maintained in public discourse allow them to alleviate their accountability to some degree. However, the media and politicians do not operate in an isolated bubble and the routes in which such arguments have fermented and developed are highly visible throughout academic discourse.

Perhaps building upon the perspective of new media and the supposedly intrinsic link to violence, in 1961, Albert Bandura (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963), a Stanford Psychologist, began experimental studies aimed at the notion of limiting the access children have to violent media. This prominent study, known as the Bobo Doll experiment, aimed to bolster Banduras' perspective that human behaviour was

not inherited through genetic factors but learnt through social interaction. The essence of Banduras' argument was that watching violent acts provides the individual with a 'social script' to guide behaviour. One would hope that within the chronological context, Bandura's argument is likely perceived by most as a response the positivist movements and the notion of the atavistic criminal. However, despite the study now being widely discredited, primarily due to the questionable research methods employed (Hart & Kritsonis, 2006), a pool of academics who have an interest in the link between violence and video games have in fact been influenced by the social script of Bandura's legacy, the irony of which seems to have been lost. Whilst the form of media under discussion has progressed from television and comics to video games, the same tired debate has continued (Colwell and Kato, 2003; Hasan, Begue, & Bushman, 2012; Kutner & Olson, 2008; Sherry, 2006; Unsworth, Devilly, & Ward, 2007).

Following the tragic Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings (Wilson, Yardley, & Pemberton, 2016), the media and even the FBI soon latched on to the notion that the perpetrators use of violent video games were intrinsically linked to their abhorrent acts, much in the way that the recent tragic events in Santa Fe High School have been mirrored (Beckett, 2018). This notion went as far as the parents of some of the victims of the Columbine tragedy attempting to sue gaming companies citing the shooters were desensitised to violence due to the use of their products (Ward, 2001). The convergence of the factors discussed so far have become increasingly problematic. Following the tragic Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings (Wilson et al., 2016), the media and even the FBI soon latched on to the notion that the perpetrators use of violent video games were intrinsically linked to their abhorrent acts, much in the way that the tragic events in Santa Fe

High School and more recent statements by Donald Trump mirrored.

Such notions were duly preyed upon by the media in an effort to create what [Cohen \(2002\)](#) would refer to as a moral panic. It must be noted, however, that the authors perceive this to be a by-product of capitalist culture and an effort to generate profit. Due to this stance, they do not subscribe to the notion of moral panics as a theoretical basis (a point that is expanded upon in Chapter 2). This, combined by the neoliberal intensification of administrative criminology and the wider social sciences, duly gave rise to the ensuing tidal wave of studies ([Sherry, 2006](#)), hypothesising the link (or lack thereof) between video games and violence. It is within this administrative paradox that the link between the media and academia converge to create the redundant epoch this book aims to challenge. The countless number of repetitive studies largely utilises similar methodological tendencies as Bandura's discredited contribution. As [Paik and Comstock \(1994\)](#) highlight (in regard to television violence and antisocial behaviour), the less precise measures utilised tend to overestimate the effects the studies proscribe. This combined with the publication bias detailed by [Ferguson \(2007\)](#), who also proscribes to the view that researchers in the area of video game studies are overly concerned with proving or disproving a link than testing theory in a methodologically precise manner, highlights the issues of the 'video games create violence' discussion.

Whilst the view of [Ferguson \(2007\)](#) momentarily inspires an optimistic glimmer that respected academics within the field may have already transitioned past the scholarly epoch described is however short-lived, evidenced by the academic discussion between [Ferguson and Konjin \(2015\)](#) in which they engage in a 'peaceful debate' around video games and the issue of violence. Whilst it was hoped Ferguson would

progress past the tautological discussion, he instead, eight years later, engages in a debate on the subject. It is this discussion and lack of prudence to look past the discussion of days gone by that epitomises the redundancy of the field.

However, some academics have in the past decade managed to marginally transition past the fixed academic gaze and offer small developments within the scope of the field of study. Notable was the discussion by Luck (2009) around the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia followed by the rebuttal of such distinction by Bartel (2015). In the midst of the discussion, Schulzke (2010) offered perhaps the most promising development in the field for numerous decades which was unfortunately overwhelmingly disregarded. Schulzke offered a scholarly article upon defending the morality of violent video games. Whilst unfortunately still transfixed upon the notion of violence, the paper offered Kantian, Aristotelian and utilitarian moral theories. Within this context, Schulzke offered a rare and important advance within the academic discussion of deviancy in video games.

The disintegration of this myriad approach to video games through the sociological gaze is beginning to wane. McCaffree and Proctor (2017) offered a welcome, if not short, development of the discussion. Their paper hypothesises that both violence and property crime are negated by the use of video games. Their response to psychology's insistence on identifying and debating causal links between video games is indeed necessary, as well as their inclusion of sociological perspectives in the form of routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) being eagerly received. Unfortunately, the paper stays within the nexus of administrative academia whilst failing to observe the key factor in regard to the discussion of video games and deviancy.

In short, the historical legacy of Bandura alongside the media's incessant proclivity for regressive but profit

generating headlines which offer to the public a comfort blanket explanation for heinous acts of interpersonal violence, rather than reflecting upon wider structural conditions has ensured both political discourse and academia have been unwilling or unable to look past the superfluous perspectives of days gone by. Video games may or may not incite a small minority of consumers to commit violence, though we would maintain the latter. We propose in this book, however, that they can instigate a wider variety of harms. The gaming platforms are intrinsically linked to other forms of deviancy and crime, observable once the myopic gaze is avert and they are perceived from differing theoretical lenses. Since the early developments of the video game industry, beginning with the Atari, games have consistently presented deviant and taboo topics to consumers as detailed in more depth in Chapter 3. Whilst some of these games have been attributed to acts of rebellion and political statements, many have purely been objects of consumerism presenting deviant acts to boost sales through shock value. As we finished the final draft of the collection, it came to light that Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony were suspected to have had some involvement in the Chinese forced labour camps ([Xiuzhong Xu, Cave, Leibold, Munro, & Ruser, 2020](#)).

To engage with such a focus of the video games industry, which allows us to question the depth and spectrum of harms, it is crucial to first articulate what is meant by deviancy. As [Smith and Raymen \(2018\)](#) detail, the perspective is shaped by both cultural criminology's critique of liberal and consumer capitalism ([Hayward, 2016](#)) and ultrarealism's ([Winlow & Hall, 2006](#)) focus upon the corrosive nature of consumer capitalism corrosive values, which underpin harmful subjectivities. From this approach, the atypical and widely accepted perspective of deviancy accepted within sociology, premised upon behaviour which exceeds the tolerance of the

community (Clinard & Meier, 2007), is ‘inverted’ (Smith & Raymen, 2018). From this opposing theoretical gaze, we can begin to ascertain how the sociopolitical structures, framed within economic capital as the central driving force, promote modes of deviant behaviour as a normalised. We increasingly pursue individual identities, utilising symbolic materials and experiences as the signifier of such an identity. However, the increasing homogeneity propelled by consumer culture stifles the possibility of the desired individuality. Such bids for individuality invariably lead to those engaged within the nexus to impinge upon the rights of the other (Smith & Raymen, 2018), resulting in a multitude of harms, though due to the homogenisation of material culture the harms are largely unrecognised. Smith and Raymen (2018) identify four core harms within the remit of deviant leisure: subjective harms, environmental harms, socially corrosive harms and embedded harms. The seminal work of Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) of ‘murder boxes’ in video games is observed as a demonstration of the subjective harms they discuss within the remit of deviant leisure. Indeed, many of the notions proposed within the following chapters align with such categorisation, though as will become apparent we propose elements of embedded and subjective harms are also observable.

With this in mind, we approached various colleagues with the notion that video games are inexplicitly intertwined with aspects of deviancy to varying degrees. The following collection is the result of this. It does not seek to provide any definitive answer, nor is it based upon methodologically robust research projects seeking to prove or disprove a hypothesis around the content as some scholars have sought in recent months (see the brilliant article by Denham & Spokes, 2019). The following chapters are likely best premised as theoretical thought pieces which hope to provoke

discussions around the nature of deviant leisure and video games in the future away from the Bandura affect.

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2

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS AS THE ARCHITECTS OF THEIR OWN DEFEAT IN THE STUDY OF VIDEO GAMES

Max Hart

INTRODUCTION

The media, that being the mass media communications industry, has a long and peculiar history with gaming, often circulating a field of vision that the consumption of them warrants major concern, a view that has gained increasing notoriety alongside technological advancement's subsequent increase in 'real-life'



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gaming simulations (Rowlands, Ratnabalasuriar, & Noel, 2016). Essentially, from classic board games such as ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ (Waldron, 2005) to modern video games that now occupy online spaces, the media has been part of a myriad of groups including politicians and academics in stirring up an aroma of ‘danger’ towards them (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). Subsequently, academics, through their own curiosity and as a result of political interest (Markey & Ferguson, 2017), have given vast attention towards proving or disproving the notion that video games have a causal relationship with violence. Some discourse coming from social sciences has claimed such a relationship exists (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Anderson & Murphy, 2003; Carnagey & Anderson, 2006), whilst the majority have disputed these claims (Ferguson et al., 2008; Markey & Ferguson, 2017; Unsworth, Devilly, & Ward, 2007; Williams & Skoric, 2005) and even suggested video games rather than causing violence reduces it (Ferguson, 2007; Colwell & Kato, 2003). The latter group have expanded their discussion by offering explanations as to why despite little supporting evidence these views are able to forge. Offering an accumulation of often interlocking ideas formed around the theory that video games causing violence is a ‘Moral Panic’ (see Drotner, 1992; Ferguson, 2008; Grant, 2018; Markey & Ferguson, 2017; Rowlands et al., 2016; Sternheiner, 2007).

However, whilst branding video games as causing violence is evidently misleading and damaging for social science discourse (Markey & Ferguson, 2017), likewise, it has been the repetitive casting of issues with video games into the faulty realm of the ‘Moral Panic’. It is this that the following chapter emphasises. Despite expanding on the points raised above to provide a context of video games and the media, the following does not wish to add to the video game as a violence catalyst debate; the current disputing evidence illuminates perfectly the naivety of such arguments. Thus, this chapter uses Mark Horsley’s (2017)

‘Forget Moral Panics’ as well as other critical commentators to not only highlight the naivety of the moral panic and video games argument but also to systematically dismantle the current academic discourse surrounding ‘Moral Panics’ in relation to video games and the media and where it now must go.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE MEDIA, VIDEO GAME DISCOURSE AND MORAL PANICS

As discussed, despite the lack of supporting evidence, there has been a continuous ‘war on video games’ (Markey & Ferguson, 2017), seeing the media, politicians and in-denial academics join forces to take down the cultural phenomenon of video games that are embedded with so-called nasties. But how, and why, has this extremely misleading view appeared and generated momentum? These questions, and the answers to them, are essential in providing a historical context of video games and the media – offering a glimpse of where video games and violence discourse has ventured, what it has argued and, most importantly, provide a basis of where these arguments now need to go to generate useful discussion.

The thought that video games act as a catalyst for immoral actions arguably hits a turning point in 1976–1983. Even though violent games existed prior to its release, ‘Death Race’ gained negative attention because of its violent nature (Rowlands et al., 2016). Likewise, in 1983, US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop suggested video games such as Asteroid should be treated as a major factor in family violence, a concern that fuelled the later Congress attempts to regulate and censor the video game industry (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). However, the most significant ignition of this view came in the late 1990s when a series of school shootings took place generating a media frenzy of who is to blame (Rowlands et al., 2016), in

fact, more often than not it is shootings that generate the discussion about the harms of video games. Typifying this was the 1999 Columbine massacre in Colorado. On 20 April, two teenagers, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, attacked their school shooting, killing 12 students, 1 teacher and injuring 21 others, before killing themselves (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). Subsequently, the media focused their attention on what ‘other’ had caused two teenage boys to commit such a heinous act, conjuring up explanations consisting of vengeance against bullies, antisocial goth music culture and scene reenactment from hit film ‘The Matrix’ (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). However, it was the fact that the two were avid players of the video game ‘Doom’ that the media focused upon (Ferguson, 2008), consequently fortifying the idea that teen violence, specifically school shootings, has a causal relationship with video games.

The Columbine shooting was far from an anomaly regarding video games being linked as a catalyst for violence. In 1997, Michael Carneal killed three students and injured five more in his high school in Paducah Kentucky (Newman, 2013), which resulted in video game Grand Theft Auto III being blamed alongside pornography and violent films for generating confusion between real and fantasy for Carneal (Rowlands et al., 2016). Furthermore, in 1998, after killing his parents Kip Kinkel entered his high school in Springfield Oregon, shooting and killing 2 students and injuring 25 (Newman, 2013). Since, there has been nearly 5,000 news articles discussing video games in the context of these shootings (Markey, Markey, & French, 2015). Some headlines include ‘Virtual Realities Spur School Massacres’, ‘Bloodlust Video Games Put Kids in the Crosshairs’ and ‘All Those Who Deny Any Linkage between Violence in Entertainment and Violence in Real Life, Think Again’ (Sternheimer, 2007). Highlighting the depth media outlets has travelled in order to demonise video games.

Even though the research that developed around this time, and still to this day hugely contradicts such claims, these arguments are very much embedded within present media outputs. [Kelly, Lynes, and Hoffin \(2018\)](#) explain that following the 2014 Sandy Hook elementary school shooting in Connecticut, where 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 children and 6 members of staff ([BBC, 2015](#)), and the 2018 Santa Fe high school shooting in Texas, in which 8 students and 2 teachers were shot and killed whilst 13 others were wounded ([Dart, 2018](#)), the media and the FBI were fast to discuss the perpetrators avid use of violent video games and their alleged link to their actions. It also took just a short time after the recent shootings in El Paso Texas that killed 20, and the Ohio Dayton that killed 9 ([Perraudin, 2019](#)), before Fox News aired an interview with the Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy who alluded to video games causing gun violence and being a major issue for future generations ([Wu, 2019](#)). Such claims do not go unnoticed and often result in legal proceedings and attempts in regulation and legislation change. [Kelly et al. \(2018\)](#) explain that following the columbine attack, parents of the victims tried to take legal action and sue gaming companies for their products desensitising the shooters to violence, and [Rowlands et al. \(2016\)](#) describe numerous examples of attempts in legislation to restrict video game violence and their use, including the Protect the Children from Video Game Sex and Violence Act, the Safe Games Illinois Act and the Family Entertainment Protection Act. Though almost all failed due to their flawed foundations, they signify the impact the constant evil video game rhetoric can have.

Clearly, there is a nonharmonious relationship between the media and video games that historically, and relentlessly, blame the unimaginable actions of youth violence on the products created by gaming companies. However, as previously mentioned, the media coexists alongside politicians and

academics in the antivideo game discourse, creating research claiming to support the media's concerns. Specifically, [Anderson and Dill \(2000\)](#) examined violent video game effects on aggression-related variables, claiming to have found a positive relationship between aggressive behaviour, aggressive thoughts and delinquency with 'real-life' violent video game play. Similarly, [Anderson and Murphy \(2003\)](#) placed this within the context of young women and once again concluded that exposure to violent video games increased aggressive behaviour.

However, there are just as many that dispute these findings and arguably disprove the idea beyond question. For example, [Ferguson et al. \(2008\)](#) completed two similar studies and found the exact opposite, highlighting that randomised exposure to violent video game conditions or previous real-life exposure to violent video games has no impact on aggression. They also suggested that family violence would be more attributable to the data than exposure to violent video games ([Ferguson et al., 2008](#)). In addition, [Williams and Skoric \(2005\)](#) conducted a longitudinal study with a controlled group to examine changes in aggressive thoughts and behaviours, in which participants were subjected to an online video game; likewise, their findings did not support the notion that violence in video games has a causal relationship with real-life aggression. [Ferguson \(2008\)](#) has put the different findings down to obvious errors made by intentionally oblivious academics. He explains that these studies fail to consider any other factors that may contribute to increased aggression, for example, family violence ([Ferguson et al., 2008](#)). He adds that most of this research is also conducted with 'normal' children or adults, rather than individuals who might be considered 'high risk' ([Ferguson, 2008](#)). Such failures are not surprising as they rely on the foundations set by [Bandura, Ross, and Ross \(1961\)](#) and media effects (see [Marsh & Melville, 2014](#)) that at best – due to their positivist foundations – can only highlight any surface relationships ([Hall & Winlow, 2015](#)).

A bobo doll study by [Bandura et al. \(1961\)](#) observed and measured the impact aggressive films had upon young children by showing them scenes of a person attacking a doll, claiming to have found a causal relationship as the children imitated the behaviour, thus also failing to consider any drives acting as mediating factors such as culture, ideology and socioeconomic conditions ([Hall & Winlow, 2015](#)).

Following their important dismissal of the video game causing aggression concept, interest was expanded into why the media, politicians and academics get away with repetitive misleading discussions and sway public opinion. This has resulted in a concoction of ideas forming around [Cohen's \(1972\)](#) 'Moral Panic and Folk Devils'; essentially, reactions to minority and marginalised groups by the public and politicians are needless ones of fear and threat to the values and consensus maintained by that society. This is generated, exaggerated and spun by the mass media who focus on said group and label them as a deviant ([Cohen, 1972](#)). Since, this has become one of the 'untouchable' but hindering theories in Social Science ([Hall & Winlow, 2015](#)) with 100 citations per year since the early 1990s ([Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2013](#)). For example, [Hall et al. \(1978\)](#) 'Policing the Crisis' highlights the moral panic created at the hands of media overreaction and the consequent overemphasis on policing black offenders. [Pearson \(1983\)](#) makes similar arguments, but in the context of hooliganism, likewise does [Waddington \(1986\)](#) concerning mugging, [Watney \(1987\)](#) with pornography and aids, [Nijjar \(2015\)](#) with rioting youth, [Weidner \(2009\)](#) in relation to illegal drugs, [Cavanagh \(2007\)](#) and [Clapton, Cree, and Smith \(2013\)](#) surrounding paedophilia and child protection, [Bonn \(2010\)](#) with terrorism and [Friedersdorf \(2015\)](#) highlights the rise of panics as a result of smartphones.

As discussed, in an effort to explain the misleading video game concepts circulated by the media, academics have based their thoughts around it being part of an unnecessary and

vamped up fear. Fundamentally, they argue that video games have also taken on the role of folk devil, in which sensationalised and untrue news media spread concerns that video game violence needs addressing to prevent youths from becoming desensitised, aggression fuelled and consequently breaking society's values. For example, [Ferguson \(2008\)](#); [Karlsen \(2015\)](#); [Rowlands et al. \(2016\)](#); [Markey and Ferguson \(2017\)](#) and [Grant \(2018\)](#) all provide instances of when video games have wore the cloak of folk devil and succumb to unprecedented criticisms, including *Death Race*, *Wolfenstein*, *Doom*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Grand Theft Auto* and *Fortnite*. [Markey and Ferguson \(2017\)](#) have explained that this involves a step-by-step process that seemingly intertwines with explanations offered by other commentators. First, 'Extreme Claims Come before Data', then 'Public Calls for Research Supporting the Moral Panic', followed by 'The Goldilocks Effect' and finally 'Save the Children Mentality' ([Markey & Ferguson, 2017](#)). Essentially, shocking claims are made regarding video games and their threat to society before any data can prove or disprove it. Followed by further calls for research to 'fix' the alleged issue, exemplified following the Sandy Hook shooting by Senator Rockefeller's calls for research into violence in video games to provide preventative groundwork despite no connection to the shooter and video game use being made ([Bachman, 2012](#)). Then, concerns are raised comparing the current overly violent and explicit media with ones of past generations that got it 'just right', resulting in cries to protect the children. This is a problem as it removes the possibility of proving or disproving the legitimacy of the 'panic', instead hurdling to faulty pseudoscience studies to answer the demands of the hand that feeds.

When offering a deeper exploration of why the media, politicians and academics partake in validating, addressing and fuelling the video game and violence moral panic, the discourse

offers up numerous answers situated within the critical and radical constructionist framework stuck in motion since the 1960s and 1970s, thus providing a perfect point to, whilst detailing such arguments, interject [Horsley's \(2017\)](#) critiques as well as relevant others to highlight how by casting video game harms into the realm of the 'Moral Panic', academics – and wider commentators – have become architects of social sciences own defeat in making sense of crime and deviance within the virtual world – specifically video games. Therefore, the second part of this chapter discusses how, despite touching upon very relevant and important issues within the video game blame debate, Moral Panic fanatics have somewhat missed a 'trick' and succumb to the ivory tower comfort zone of the Moral Panic thesis ([Kelly et al., 2018](#)) and consequently failed in pushing the discourse in a much needed and suitable direction for the twenty-first century issues relating to video games.

DISMANTLING THE MORAL PANIC EMBEDMENT WITHIN VIDEO GAME AND CRIME/DEVIANCE DISCOURSE

Over the last few years, ultrarealist academics have called for social science to move away from politically influenced theoretical frameworks that have struggled to stand the test of time as society shifted further into liberal capitalism, consequently stagnating social science theory and distracting disciplines, especially Criminology, from solving their 'aetiological crisis' (see [Hall & Winlow, 2015](#)). One of these is the Moral Panic thesis. In 2017, Horsley provided a step-by-step critique that arguably exposed the Moral Panic's frailties beyond question from its foundations to its last grasp attempts to stay relevant in the current issues of twenty-first century neoliberal society. Ultimately the paper highlighted the weaknesses of a misguided

but previously ‘untouchable’ framework susceptible to real critique and Social Scientists as the Architects of Their Own Defeat providing opportunity to progress crime and deviance discussions – an improvement compared to its previous reviews that ridicule but maintains its position within theory (see Carrabine, 2008; Jewkes, 2011; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995).

Essentially, Horsley (2017) agrees with the critical comments that social science discourse overuses ‘out-of-time’ frameworks such as the Moral Panic, explaining that the concept was set in stone during the mid-twentieth century amidst liberal pluralism and before postmodernism and the overwhelming influence of social and economic liberalism. Subsequently, crime, deviance and harms were assumed to be constructs created by elites, thus having no ontological reality (Horsley, 2017). However, Horsley (2017) argues because of this shift towards neoliberal capitalism, social order is no longer cemented in a win or lose scenario between the elites overt control and those pushing against it, instead it relies on consumer capitalist desires (see Hall, Winlow, & Ancrum, 2012). Essentially, the current processes

...expand time and effort simulating and releasing libidinal forces such as ambition, competition and the pursuit of individualised desires...whilst... desperately trying to keep a lid on them

(Horsley, 2017, p. 11)

Consequently, as Hall (2012) and Horsley (2017) explain, this creates ‘pseudo-pacified sociosymbolic competition’ which maintains social order by putting to use the pursuit of lifestyle desires by individuals. Ultimately, Horsley (2017) illuminates that Cohen failed foundationally by not considering such ontological foundations that exist within the current structural processes, and crime, deviance and harm are not the consequences of self-expression against a restraining

ethical order, but they are attributed to the oblivious conformity to the fundamental underpinnings of late capitalism.

Evidently, those who have placed video game concerns within the Moral Panic group have also inherited Cohen's failures and removed the possibility of any progression within the existing debates – the subject of the panic may change, but its faulty foundations will not. However, the intricacies of the arguments made by such commentaries offer further examples of these failures and warrant further critical debate to progress these discussions properly. Specifically, [Grant \(2018\)](#) has claimed that the constant spinning of video game concerns is a way for politicians to take steps towards a 'China's golden shield' (see [King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013](#)) style of control over internet freedom. Though China is currently under a strict authoritarian regime meaning the crime as a batting match between elites and general society argument may be possible, within the context of the United Kingdom and the United States, where most of these discussions contextualise themselves and are two of the most neoliberal consumer capitalists reliant countries, the type of control Grant is referring to would be paradoxical for the current structural processes. Not to mention the arguably increasing influence of neoliberal societies to the nonelite Chinese citizens, who have recently paraded a US flag during violent protests in the name of democracy ([USA Today, 2019](#)). In addition, upon further investigation, the Chinese governments internet censorship is much more complex and not an issue of simple restriction and instead harnesses potential in aiding neoliberal capitalist systems by clever sporadic releasing of techno grips to allow for certain amounts of consumption ([King et al., 2013](#)).

In a similar vein, [Miller \(2006\)](#) argues that video games have simply become the latest panic in a long history of 'mediums' that, during their early days, are portrayed as evil as they challenge the established order. Likewise, [Markey and Ferguson \(2017\)](#) detail that as far back the fifteenth century moral panics

involving advancing technology existed, and seemingly did so with every new art form. They explain that only the religious elite could read the bible as part of an intentional plot to keep ‘ordinary’ people in line, so when mechanical printing press was invented, society called for versions in their native languages. Consequently, harsh penalties were handed to the producers of such texts due to fears of an uprising against the hierarchy because of misinterpretations of the bible (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). They continue to highlight this trend with other emerging forms, such as the concerns relating to women in the nineteenth century as they allegedly become confused between real and fantasy due to reading, to the increasing panics surrounding young people due to the new concept of adolescence mustered up by the industrial revolution, including hair styles, jazz music, rock and roll music, radio and television (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). Here, Miller, Markey and Ferguson become the perfect examples of not allowing social science to move on from the overreaching Moral Panic. As Horsley (2017) has explained, the established ethical order no longer exists, and instead an ontological structure consisting of libidinal desires has taken its place. So, whilst perhaps being onto something when discussing advancing technology and panics before the turn to neoliberalism, they have since naively followed the moral panic assumptions. At the neoliberal turn, these media are now a fundamental part of the consumeristic desires, not only by increasingly offering the latest tech gadgets but also by allowing for an instant connection to a worldwide cyberspace full of competitive social platforms and advertisements (Hall et al., 2012), all of which twenty-first century video gaming is part of and central to. Games can be purchased and updated, and the playable hardware offers immediate internet access to social platforms and online catalogues. Therefore, rather than providing a threat to the established order, gamers are arguably conforming to the latest symbolisation of ‘winning’

(see [Hall et al., 2012](#)). Importantly, a point also raised by [Hall \(2012\)](#) who exposed Cohen's misleading label of mods and rockers as nonconformists when their choice of image and style would suggest a conformity to the consumer culture at that specific time.

In addition, it is the general recognition by social sciences that the media portray the negative as it sells, and the moral panic discourse is no different. Something, they argue, has been constantly increasing due to the reliance on social media for our news, as the media have begun to use catchy but misleading headlines called 'clickbait' ([Markey & Ferguson, 2017](#)) that results in rapid shares of stories across cyberspace, and unfortunately ones detailing an evil phenomenon creating a generation of psychopaths (as previously discussed, see [Sternheimer, 2007](#)) is more attractive than one that might otherwise reveal some form of truth. Ultimately, they argue, this creates and maintains the panic that is eventually used by politicians for their own cause. However, it is likely that the rapid media advancements that have arguably increased this 'panic' have also allowed for cynicism of the media and the elite to garner momentum, as the internet has now made consumers of information also the producers of it ([Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010](#)). Though Ritzer and Jurgenson were referring to how this creates a grey area, a quick glance at recent social media conversations highlight individuals 'calling out' those blaming shootings on video games. This would suggest that the ability for anyone to provide information has allowed for closer examination of truths, removing the chance of a panic entirely. However, [Hall \(2012\)](#) highlights that even before the rise in technology that resulted in easier discussions of truths, an actual cultivated panic never existed. He explains that media representation often provides a resolution to a criminal issue, rather than leave a threat on a cliff-hanger, again, removing the possibility of a moral panic taking place.

Interestingly, this becomes part of maintaining a balance within the ‘baseline anxiety’ of the public that maintains itself just enough for economic production and political distraction (Horsley, 2017). Which really does offer up one of the biggest questions surrounding the common sense of the moral panic argument: why would it be beneficial for a system that relies so much on placidity for the sake of consumption to create a panic that could provide the spark for realisation? (Horsley, 2017), especially considering the gaming industry currently battles Hollywood as the leading popular culture market (Donovan, 2010).

Politicians also set to gain from appearing to tackle the issue of video games causing violence by boosting popularity, election votes and hiding truths (Markey & Ferguson, 2017). Subsequently, this has been a huge vocal point for the moral panic commentators and one that – at least for a length of time – has significant credibility. They explain that through the conjure of the ‘Moral Panic’ politicians, the media and ignorant researchers are able to suppress real issues within society that contribute to violence, such as poverty, mental illness, lack of education, family environment and inequality (Ferguson, 2008; Markey & Ferguson, 2017; Sternheimer, 2007). Trump’s public annotations (as discussed in the introduction) regarding video games do just this; shadowing the current and long-lasting issues within the United States that such tragedies would otherwise bring to the fore. The perpetrator of the recent El Paso shooting is believed to have posted an online document explaining that his attack was a result of the Hispanic invasion of Texas and is consequently being treated as a ‘Domestic Terrorism’ incident (BBC, 2019a). A problem that has seen a significant rise since online echo chambers and online hate (see Awan, 2014; Behr, Reding, Edwards, & Gribbon, 2013), filled with white supremacist conspiracy theories relating to immigration, has found its way into political discourse through

figure heads such as Trump and merged with weak and dangerous gun laws (Hoffman, 2019). Instead, Trump has suggested that mental illness needs to be taken seriously in relation to white supremacist terrorism and background checks when purchasing weapons (BBC, 2019a), and tighter regulations need to be placed on video games that ‘celebrate violence’ (Farokhmanesh & Nicolet, 2019). Not only does this insult victims of racial hate as it excuses it and is a step backwards for discourse on terrorist events (Hoffman, 2019), it is an obvious distraction measure from such issues. Though Trump’s protection over gun laws should not be surprising and is simply another issue that has been ignored due to the panic (as Moral Panic theorists would claim), as the United States has a long-lasting economic relationship with the National Rifle Association, so much so that in 2016 they spent \$4 million lobbying and contributing to politicians, including an estimated \$30 million to help Trump’s precedence campaign (BBC, 2019b).

These points certainly carry some creditability and are important. However, all of the stated impacts (mental health, inequality, lack of education and violence) are attributable to neoliberal capitalism and austerity (Hall & Winlow, 2015), and whilst noting the United States, where mass shootings are a regular occurrence meaning the video game violence debate is fought out regularly, is one of the most neoliberal countries (Hall & Winlow, 2015), it is easy to see why there is a need to hide the realities of the toxic system. It is here where the previous discourse seems to lack depth as claiming that placing emphasis on violent video games hides real societal issues may be correct, it misses the important point that it is not just about distracting truths but also about the hidden toxic realities caused by the undercurrent of liberal capitalism (Hall & Winlow, 2015).

Evidently, those casting video game harms into the realm of the moral panic have made a significant error and such arguments no longer make sense in twenty-first century

neoliberal capitalism. But at what cost? It has already been noted that distractions from truths, thus distraction from the harmful processes that lies beneath them, have been an important missing factor within existing discussions. However, [Horsley \(2017\)](#) also explains that when issues are given the moral panic treatment, it often leaves a backdoor open for the harmful subjectivities of liberal capitalism that remain unnoticed, and within the context of video games as a moral panic this has been no different. Arguably, by suggesting video game harms are ‘all just a moral panic’, commentators have ironically been the architects of their own defeat in its discourse by making the same mistake as the ones they are aiming to call out. They have played dividend to the ability of the moral panic to act a form of fetishtic disavow ([Hall & Winlow, 2015](#); [Horsley, 2017](#); [Raymen, 2017](#)), allowing the underpinning structural realities and wider deviance that is played out in video games to be placed into an impossible realm and go under the radar. As the following chapters in this book will highlight in further detail, video games are rife with different acts of criminality and deviance fuelled by the harmful subjectivities of late capitalism that has, for the most part, failed to gather any significant discussion within a loss-lose two-way debate of media effects and moral panics. One example is the special liberty (see [Hall, 2012](#)) gaming creators such as the masterminds behind the Grand Theft Auto franchise have, who have not paid any United Kingdom corporation tax in over the last 10 years ([Tax Watch UK, 2019](#)).

CONCLUSION

Whilst the debate of whether video games are a catalyst for violence should be long over, discussions are far from where they need to be to begin to provide a more nuanced insight of

the crime and deviance seen within video games. Despite alluding to credible concerns surrounding the attempts made by the media and politicians in shielding real issues within society that may result in crime, such as inequality, poor family relationships, poverty, austerity and mental illness (Ferguson, 2008; Markey & Ferguson, 2017; Sternheimer, 2007), commentators within the video game harms discourse have built arguments upon the faulty foundations of Cohen's (1972) moral panic thesis and succumb to the same criticisms. They have failed to move on from social constructionist views that underpinned social science theory in the 1960s and 1970s and subsequently ignored the increasing shift into neoliberal capitalism (Hall & Winlow, 2015). Within this, society and its issues are no longer a 'zero-sum' match between the ethical order and those fighting against it (Horsley, 2017). Instead, it is based on a structural process that relies on libidinal desires, such as competitive individualism, ambition and greed (Hall, 2012; Horsley, 2017; Žižek, 2000), which account for issues relating to crime. Therefore, rather than media and politicians conjuring moral panics to enact an iron fist of society in reaction to a historical list of new mediums that threaten the established order (Markey & Ferguson, 2017; Miller, 2006), this is part of an equilibrium process within the baseline anxiety of society that the ontological processes of consumer capitalist society create to maintain economic production and prevent access to the obscene real (Horsley, 2017), making any possibility of a moral panic impossible and any described 'resistance' nothing but an anxious conformity to the current style essential for competitive victory within late consumer capitalism.

In essence, the video game moral panic fanatics by following the wrongful assumptions set by the previously untouchable moral panic framework have created their own Frankenstein's monster of video game and crime and deviance discourse that has cast the real deviance seen within video

games into an impossible realm and destroyed any potential in furthering the discussion. To overcome this, the moral panic must be shelved as a theory that may have once had some credibility within a bygone era and video game discourse needs to focus on its crime and deviance intricacies seen within the current neoliberal capitalist society. It is this that the remaining of this book will accomplish, offering specific examples of the previously overlooked issues involved within gaming.

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3

A CHRONOLOGY OF VIDEO GAME DEVIANCE

Kevin Hoffin and Elaine DeVos

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide a brief history of video gaming and, at certain points, present crucial points in the development of the video game industry that has raised or caused controversy in relation to the traditional interpretation of deviancy. It is important to note that this chapter is perhaps more descriptive than the content usually found within an academic text. The reason for this more descriptive approach is twofold. Firstly, this chapter serves as a contextual canvas in which all proceeding chapters are framed within. Secondly, it is important that the



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reader has an understanding of the key developments of the video game industry in order to appreciate the arguments presented in subsequent chapters. It will highlight several games relevant to this text and open the discussion for authors to proffer analysis in later pages. To understand the role that video games play in society today, it is important to examine their rather complex chronology and analyse their representation through the media as time has elapsed. This chapter will posit that the range of deviant activities one can perform in video game is now so diverse that the often-repeated debate of what effect violence and aggression in video games bleeds through into the everyday life of players, which has hampered academic discourse and analysis of the medium, is both unsophisticated and highly limited.

Originally designed as a tool for research, the level of interactivity and development on display has been a cornerstone in emphasising and drawing attention to technological advances (Donovan, 2010). Gaming media has experienced market crashes and resurgences and until recently remained a mainly outsider hobby/pastime – now gaming and gamification has become inextricably entrenched into everyday activities. We play games for fun, we communicate online and form complex strategies, we learn through gaming and we can even get more physically and mentally fit through video games.

A video game, as defined by Esposito, is ‘a *game* which we *play*, thanks to an *audio-visual apparatus*, and which can be based on a story’ (Esposito, 2005). This definition highlights the active relationship between human and computer, where one will react to the actions of the other; the deceptive simplicity of the definition hides a myriad of possibility, just as in gaming itself. Important features of the definition, as italicised, stress attention on the three most important elements of the video game – it is a game to be interacted with and there must be some kind of audio/video feedback (often seen as an active graphical output); if just one of this triad is missing, the subject is no longer

a video game. That is not to say that there cannot be features beyond that of play, as video games have proven invaluable as educational material (Gee, 2003). For example, the Acorn BBC Micro from 1981 was a famous early system which relied on edutainment-led programs, to the point where at least one could be found in most 1980s schools (Leigh, 2018, p. 62). Often referred to as electronic or computer games, for consistency this chapter will refer to all such entities as video games.

This text will show that crime and deviance within the context of video games transcends these simplistic boundaries. Specifically, deviant activities have been offered as rewards for completion; the objectives of the game itself; obligatory tasks central to the narrative or secret ‘side missions’ and have thus always been present in one form or another. Some countries are more permissive to the content of video games than others. For example, the Classification Office of New Zealand, for instance, states that for a video game to require classification, it must ‘in some way deal with sex horror, crime, violence or cruelty’ (Office of Film & Literature Classification, n.d.) or must be classified with an age rating of 15, 18 or similar (or refused classification and therefore banned) in Australia and the United Kingdom (refusal of classification in Australia and/or the United Kingdom will often lead to same in New Zealand). New Zealand presents what seems like quite a rigid series of barriers for the video games industry. However, the process of classification does take into account the ideologies/worldviews promoted (if any) behind such acts; so, games that present themselves as satires or are based in unrealistic worlds will be viewed more favourably than ones where violence is realistic and quite graphic. This generally describes video games classification globally, but there are some levels of subjective interpretations that can shift games into more mature ratings in one country over another. Saudi Arabia has a much harsher system of classifying games, to the point that ‘Grand Theft Auto 5’ (Rockstar Games, 2013), ‘Heavy Rain’

([Quantic Dream, 2010](#)) and ‘God of War’ ([Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005](#)) and over 40 others were outright banned for ‘unspecified reasons’ in a bizarre response to the social media ‘Blue Whale’ online phenomenon in which two children tragically ended their lives ([Global News, 2018](#)). It is interesting that Saudi Arabia has had this response when faced with a seemingly unconnected phenomenon, but gaming in Saudi Arabia is becoming a much larger concern, though still a relatively new one. The rapid rise of gaming in countries like Saudi Arabia and South Korea ([Carter, 2019](#)) has resulted in a high-velocity need for Governments to have some way to police/monitor their use. While the data that these Governments have are so clouded by myopic tenets that ‘video games cause violence’ ([Johnson, 2019](#)), the result will inevitably be logical missteps as authorities try to keep up. This issue is one that the writers of this book hope that they will be able to contribute towards a solution of more nuanced discussion, leading to a Governmental polity that is research-informed and free of knee-jerk reactionism.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMING – THE FIRST GENERATION

The first interactive video games were created in the early 1950s to demonstrate the power and capability of new computers to the public, rather than for entertainment. However, the long queues of visitors which developed ready to pit their wits against ‘Bertie the Brain’ when it debuted in 1950 at the Canadian National Exhibition and ‘Nimrod’ a year later in October 1951 at the Berlin Industrial Show should have been indicative of the immense power that the gaming industry would have in the future ([Bateman, 2014](#)). However, due to their use of light bulbs rather than a graphical motion display, both are generally disregarded as contenders for the title of the

first true video games. Further research developments saw the creation of 'OXO' (Douglas, 1952) at Cambridge University and Christopher Strachey's draughts program at the National Physical Laboratory built using display visuals on an electronic screen (Donovan, 2010). Again, due to a lack of moving graphics or graphics which update continuously, they are often overlooked as the true forerunners of gaming.

William Higinbotham's 'Tennis for Two' (1958) is thought to be the first video game featuring moving graphics created with the sole purpose of entertainment, therefore considered by many as the first true video game (Donovan, 2010). Higinbotham had already made a huge impact on the world as a member of the team that developed the first nuclear bomb at Los Alamos laboratory (Sullivan, 1994), but he wished to be known for his work on radar displays and his efforts to slow the nuclear arms race (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 2019). 'Tennis for Two' was developed for display at the Brookhaven National Laboratory's annual public exhibition in 1958 and was met by great public interest during the 3-day event (Sullivan, 1994). Although Higinbotham saw that visitors to the Brookhaven Exhibition liked the game, he thought it was because all the other exhibits were rather boring. Although he had patents on 20 other inventions, he never thought to patent 'Tennis for Two' as he did not consider it to be particularly innovative (American Physical Society, 2008).

Moving on from 'Tennis for Two' and the analogue systems on which it ran, the first game which used digital computing software and went beyond a single research setting to reach a much larger audience was 'Spacewar!' (Russel, 1962). Designed and built by three students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1962, the game allowed two duelling spaceships to launch torpedoes at one another whilst navigating the gravitational pull of the brightest star in the centre of the screen (Graetz, 1981). Within a year of an open house

exhibition in May 1962, copies and variations of the game started to appear in research labs across America. The original game had been played using a cathode ray tube (CRT) display and custom-built controllers on the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) PDP-1 machine but copies soon appeared not only on PDP-1s when DEC began to distribute ‘Spacewar!’ as a glorified tech demo for PDP-series computers but also on just about any research computer that had a programmable CRT (Edwards, 2011). Development spread more rapidly from 1967 as CRT displays became cheaper and therefore more readily available. A most notable ‘Spacewar!’ development occurred in 1967 at Stanford University when Stanford’s programmers developed ‘Spacewar Mode’ – a time-sharing system which allowed ‘Spacewar!’ to be run at full speed alongside other programs (Monnens & Goldberg, 2015). This enabled all-hours gaming, previously restricted to computer downtime.

It was Stanford University, California, not MIT’s version of ‘Spacewar!’ that spawned the first arcade video games, ‘Galaxy Game’ by Bill Pitts and Hugh Tuck (1971) and ‘Computer Space’ by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney (1971). When the PDP-11 was released for \$10,000 in 1971, Pitts and Tuck purchased one along with an HP 1310 Electrostatic Display and ported ‘Spacewar!’, renaming it ‘Galaxy Game’ (Donovan, 2010). Installed at the Tresidder Union at Stanford, players were charged 10 cents per game or three for a quarter making it the first coin-operated video game. Although popular, it took until 1979 for the hardware to pay for itself (Smith, 2013) and it was never commercially available due to the high build cost. Rather than buy costly hardware, Bushnell and Dabney worked together to build custom hardware to run their game *Computer Space* at low cost and then licenced it for production to Nutting Associates, a small arcade game maker in exchange for a 5% royalty on unit sales, whilst also retaining the rights to the game. Released commercially in November 1971, estimates

suggest that the game sold between 500 and 1,000 units and grossed \$3million in unit sales (Edwards, 2011). On 19 October 1972, *Rolling Stone Magazine* sponsored a 'Spacewar!' tournament at Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. Dubbed the Spacewar Olympics, this event may have been the first video game tournament (Baker, 2016) and certainly a precursor to the multi-million dollar eSports industry that we see today.

Bushnell and Dabney went on to found Atari, the makers of hit arcade game 'Pong' (Atari, 1972), which at its peak was being played on 35,000 consoles across the United States (Bowles, 2018). Pong's arcade release coincided with the release of the first commercial home video console, the 'Magnavox Odyssey' (Leigh, 2018, p. 16). This first-generation home video game console operated by utilising customised discrete logic circuits and had sold over 350,000 units by the time it was discontinued in 1975 (Leigh, 2018, p. 18) making it a huge commercial success, after a rocky start in which potential buyers were put off by the mistaken thought that the Odyssey needed a TV made by the same company to function. This dedicated console had been conceptualised by Ralph H Baer, an employee of Sanders Associates in 1966, and over the next 3 years, he, along with Bill Harrison and Bill Rusch, created several prototype consoles. The seventh prototype, the 'Brown Box', was taken up by Magnavox who agreed to produce it in January 1971 (Amos, 2019). Sanders Associates and Baer filed for the first video game patent in March of the same year, which was granted in April 1973. Their claim to a legal monopoly for any product that included a domestic television with circuits capable of producing and controlling dots on a screen enabled the company to sue dozens of company over the next 20 years for in excess of \$100 million, including Atari who they sued in 1974. Atari settled out of court paying \$700,000 to become Odyssey's

second licensee as they could not afford the estimated \$1.5 million it would cost to take it to court (Mullis, 2014).

In the late 1970s/early 1980s, thanks to an increase in power and technology and a simultaneous decrease in the costs of production, video gaming entered its golden age (Leigh, 2018). The era of simple sprites housed in large cabinets had moved forward, and home gaming was on the rise. The second generation of consoles showed more promise than the preceding consoles; they were the first to feature swappable media, housed in cartridges, cassette tapes, etc., so a single system could play a multitude of games (Leigh, 2018). The Atari 2600, or Atari VCS (1977), which used microprocessor-based hardware and games stored on ROM cartridges sold an estimated 30 million consoles (Titcomb, 2017). Prior to this, home consoles were designed to operate a single game only, thus only needed the performance specifications for that one item as the game itself was a native component of the system. This revolution in capability led to a greater variety of available concepts that were now tenable by both creators of games.

THE AGE OF GAMING DEVIANCE BEGINS – THE SECOND GENERATION

Just as the gaming industry gathered momentum, thanks to the invocation of cartridges and transferrable media storage, it was held back by a market crash in 1983, as too many investors had overrelied upon the speed of gaming's growth, thanks to their analysis of the revenue from arcade gaming (\$12 Billion in 1982), whereas the actual console market did not reciprocate their projections (Trautman, 2014). Games with extremely negative reviews such as the infamous 'E.T.: The Game' (Atari, 1982) helped to drive down the value of

gaming, the poor sales and high initial production cost for what was essentially a licenced product (from the Spielberg movie) was disastrous to the industry. A gross of game cartridges, including copies of E.T., in their hundreds were buried in a landfill site in Alamogordo, New Mexico, in 1983, as Atari were unable to think of what to do with the unsold copies (Schrier, 2014). It would take the remainder of the 1980s for gaming to regain its momentum, as new manufacturers from Japan entered the market, notably Nintendo and Sega. From this point on, due to the expanded capacity and complexities leading to increased potential in what video games could do, gamers slowly saw shifts from simple games to more experiential ones. With this new-found level of experiential gaming came the ability to pursue the human will to transgress social boundaries (Bataille, 2012; Jenks, 2003), initially, at least, from a safe distance.

One of the earliest games that the authors wish to highlight as deviant is the Atari 2600 game, 'Custer's Revenge' (Mystique, 1982); the game featured a naked sprite with an erect member traverse the screen, dodging arrows in order, with the goal being the sexual assault of a naked squaw tied to a post (Donovan, 2010, p. 98). The problematic relationship between games and sexual deviance will be further discussed in the later chapter by Lee-Treweek and Hoffin.

In 1992, the first in the Mortal Kombat series (Midway Games, 1992), a popular fighting game was released. It featured a focus on extreme violence which quickly became the subject of an outrage fuelled by the media, leading to a Senate hearing held between late 1993 and early 1994 on the violence depicted in video games (Donovan, 2010) and how that would affect the aggression in young audiences (Kirsch, 1998). Subsequently, the Senate hearing committee led by Democrat Joseph Lieberman led to the creation of the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) in the following year

(Crossley, 2014). Interestingly, Sega already used an age rating system (Donovan, 2010, p. 232), but the ESRB ensured a universality. The media and political furore surrounding the game marketed as ‘So real it hurts’, highlighting a few inconsistencies in how the video games industry was viewed by the media. Much of the ‘realistic’ violence that those outraged took exception to in the game stemmed from the performance of gruesome finishing moves called ‘Fatalities’ (Donovan, 2010, p. 227) in which players’ characters could among other things throw grappling hooks, ice projectiles and, at the most extreme end, physically dismember their opponents in completely impossible fashions to win (certain characters could tear opponents’ heads from their body pulling out their spinal cords), which was argued to be irrelevant in promoting and encouraging real-life violence. In 1997, Connecticut, USA, 13-year-old Noah Wilson was tragically stabbed and killed by Yancy Salazar, also 13. Wilson’s parents placed the blame on Midway Games and *Mortal Kombat* and claimed that Salazar was recreating a fatality he had seen in the game. The Court dismissed the case upon finding that the fatality in question did not exist and therefore the accusation had no basis (Hopkins, 2018). What Lieberman and the Senate had done, by introducing the ESRB, was to make it easier to create violent video games; however, Lieberman was clear that his intention was to impose a complete ban, but was aware that it would be in contravention of the US Constitution (Donovan, 2010, p. 226).

What became apparent, however, is that the video games industry was in an era of transition, an activity that up until this point was perceived as a children’s activity, now found itself also addressing the needs of older, more mature gamers. Before, gaming was not taken nearly seriously enough to warrant such an authoritative body, but after 1994, the ESRB would rate games across all systems, according to their

content, to ensure that they are sold to suitable audiences. Gaming and its consumers had come of age. Aware of the freedoms that they had in the early 1990s and the needs of the previous generation of gamers who had stuck with the medium beyond their childhood, developers created games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom* (iD software, 1993) which were instrumental in providing more mature content, fully cognisant that no one in authority was watching closely enough and enjoying an audience who wanted more than *Super Mario* (Donovan, 2010). In ports (conversions between gaming platforms) for the family-oriented Super Nintendo Entertainment System, of *Mortal Kombat*, such aesthetics of extreme violence would be removed or heavily censored. However, when the sequel arrived, the gore would return, as the ESRB rating was deemed enough to support the distribution of the game to the appropriate audience.

THE NEXT GEN OF 'DEVIANCE'

Due to the technical limitations of cartridges as a gaming platform, new consoles would begin to use their own branded CD discs or DVDs. This enabled a much fuller more immersive experience with smoother transitions between loading times and richer gaming worlds. This enhanced the industry to allow for more diverse activities to become gamified.

The *Grand Theft Auto* series (DMA Design, Rockstar Games, 1997–present) has become one of the most anticipated and highly regarded releases of the last 20 years; later games such as *Grand Theft Auto 4* and *5* (Rockstar Games, 2008; 2013) can, with their heavier concentration on plotting, be described loosely as 'noir'. The allegorical America featured in the sandbox gaming worlds (lack of linear level/progression structure) presents the result of a satirical and sometimes

gloriously profane eye over structures and institutions integral to modern Western life: 'Lifeinvader' makes fun of the ubiquitous nature of social media, the corrupt 'FIB' does the same for the FBI. Corporations in general are seen as sinister and amoral. This approach gives the criminal undertaking attitude that the player is forced to adapt to some moral justification, therefore making the carnage more palatable.

The protagonist, our avatar, travels across an open-world environment committing various violent and acquisitive crimes to earn money and progress through the game. Although the essential missions encourage deviance in order to move forward, there are multiple options (side missions, mini games) that will allow the player to experience further criminality. The protagonist enacts a virtual form of special liberty in order to disavow society's rules as a criminal undertaker (Hall, 2012) and indulge in a degree of personal sovereignty (Hoffin, 2019). However, this does come with consequences; the police will attempt to stop the player, with their efforts increasing on a scale from 1–5 stars in proportion to the severity or volume of crime committed but can be outrun and hidden from. If successfully caught, the police arrest you (or if significant wanted rating is high enough, kill you) and you will resume at either the hospital (if killed), having been relieved of the value of your treatment, or the police station, relieved of some of your money and your weapon stock. Grand Theft Auto's numerous activities deserve a mention within this chapter. Stealing cars, hacking, mugging, burglary and robbery are all rooted in game. There is particular detail given to organising bank robberies in Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar Games, 2013), assessing the blueprint of the bank or 'scoping out the joint' and planning the logistics of when best to hit and how best to strategise, thus evolving the game past relying on impulsive criminal acts towards a more organised dimension of criminality.

A standout mission in *Grand Theft Auto V*, 'By the Book', is perfectly emblematic of the view of deviance within the game. In it, the player's character tortures an Azerbaijani man suspected of links to terror organisations. After a graphic representation of the torture itself using various instruments, the game offers a dialogue that denigrates the actual value of torture, demeaning it as a tool for sadists. Playing the torturer is not a role that players are inclined to enjoy, as it is, the gamifying aspects of the various set pieces beyond the game mechanics on offer elsewhere (moving the analogue stick to dislodge a tooth) are far from fun and produce a satirical milieu of the USA's sanctioned torture against terror suspects (waterboarding is one of the options that the player can utilise). Once the avatar, Trevor Phillips, and by extension, the player, has finished the scene and extracted information from the victim, the game punctuates this sense of unease by offering a treatise on the ineffectiveness of torture as a tool for extracting information.

As the media's response to violent gaming has been consistently reliant on spectacles such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, notable media producers have created a sweeping statement denigrating the games themselves and the subculture that play them. The moral panic argument begins to falter as the population who 'do' video games (play and create) augments, but patterns of violence that can be 'attributed' to gamers, arising from their habits do not truly correlate. The consensus that the media voices held that gamers are overly aggressive and prone to violent acts has slowly been chipped away, the risk of alienating a gaming audience being a very real prospect, turning away a constantly ameliorating sector of the population. There are also the evident mistakes that the media can make when talking about gaming; in 2004, 14-year-old Stefan Pakeerah was murdered by 17-year-old friend Warren Leblanc in Leicestershire, England. The murder was

heavily linked to the game *Manhunt* (Rockstar Games, 2003), as the method used resembled the brutality in the game. A copy of the game being discovered was both documented and reported by the media. The game was widely removed from sale all over the country and subsequently interest in the item rose. However, it was later revealed that the investigation unearthed no connection to *Manhunt*, as the rationale behind the murder was robbery to repay a drug debt, and the game itself was found in the victim's room, not the offender's (BBC News, 2004). This began a backlash against the media, particularly the Daily Mail who reported widely on the subject, ignoring police reports and created their own narrative (Fahey, 2004). In later chapters, Hart will argue for the renegotiation and eventual removal of 'Moral Panics' appertaining to video games, in accordance with the work of Horsley (2017).

In 2017, the phenomenon of 'swatting' became public knowledge through the murder of Andrew Finch. A criminal act whereby one person makes a hoax call to the emergency services results in the police arriving at the address of an intended victim. A hoax caller, identified as Tyler Raj Bariss, who had previously performed 'swatting' on victims for hire and had a previous criminal record for hoax bomb threats and domestic violence (Manna, 2018), was instructed to send emergency services to Finch's address on behalf of Casey Viner, who had threatened to swat another player that he had argued with over *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017). The intended victim, Shane Gaskill, had given Viner an address that he had previously lived at (now the home of Finch), but had been evicted the previous year. Bariss called Wichita Police, making them believe there was a live hostage situation, resulting in the completely innocent Finch being shot and killed by a police officer. This will be discussed further in Lamb's contribution, which will detail the

development of swatting as a phenomenon and raise questions regarding the difficulties of policing such convergences between online/offline actualities of violence.

As consoles now are ubiquitously connected to the internet, it has become standard to games to be released in an incomplete state with huge patches downloaded later to cover up any issues raised in the game. Prior to this, games that were released in a subpar state generally remained so. Now games like ‘No Man’s Sky’ ([Hello Games, 2016](#)) upon release could not fulfil the momentous promises it had made to consumers on its near limitless gameplay. A few years and many patches later, it is finally showing the promise that the developers envisioned from the start. The evolution towards online-friendly consoles has also introduced the idea of DLC (Downloadable Content), which has been instrumental in diversifying the income stream for the gaming industry. Gaming has also become a feature of social media sites such as Facebook; social media has even formed with video games at its centre, such as Twitch, where gamers watch each other play.

As gaming has appropriated the ‘freemium’ model, upon which access to a game’s basic functions are free and yet enhancements cost real currency, game developers have begun to utilise ‘loot crates’. This system relies on players gambling on whether by paying a certain sum, they will receive a ‘rare’ item which will either improve their chance of beating the game OR other players (a power-up, a new gun, etc.) or something that will only make aesthetic and cosmetic changes to a gamer’s online avatar. Since the controversy has come to light, developers stress that these items may also be gained through playing the game without purchases, but this realistically involves a heavy amount of ‘grinding’, a term which denotes playing certain parts of the game over and over to achieve the desired points to exchange for the items in

question. Gambling has been a feature of gaming for a very long time; but when the target market for many of these games is those under 18, the decision to include such systems becomes problematic (Matthews-King, 2018). As other elements of gambling esports (both legitimate and illegitimate) have augmented in their fame and public interests have become as fertile ground for betting as horse-racing, fans all over the world watch live streams of games and bet on outcomes (Luongo, 2018). As such areas are relatively unmonitored, the risks of unrestricted gambling among children are incredibly high (Stockwell, 2016). The purpose is clearly to increase revenue for the creator, but if this also ruins the progression of the game itself, it can be assumed that there is a shift in the way that video games are consumed and responded to. This combination of gaming and real-world currency has highlighted a risk factor far beyond that originally imagined by the medium, and now actual counts of fraud can be committed on a gaming platform.

CONCLUSION

While arguably a 'safe' form of transgression for many, a hobby that primarily harms no external party, players experiencing deviance in video gaming provide quandaries for authoritative bodies. The common discourse that violence in video games produces violent effects from gamers is outdated and irrelevant. Deviance in gaming is far more varied in its presentation. Research has offered both sides of the violence dichotomy to be true at one point or another (Cooper & Mackie, 1986; Funk, 1993; Irwin & Gross, 1995; Silvern & Williamson, 1987). The media may continuously continue with the narrative of the dangers of gaming, as that is easier than shedding light on the other systematic relevant causes of

violence. Dr Tanya Bryon in her 2008 report, 'Safer Children in a Digital World', offered the following in her conclusion:

The current debates on the “harms” of video games and the internet are the latest manifestations of a long tradition of concerns relating to the introduction of many forms of new media

(Bryon Review, 2008)

Thus traversing the callow pitfalls in the argument about video game deviance entirely and transposing the blame across to the inherent mistrust in the evolution of media (including the shadowy spaces where traditional media does not have a foothold or means to profit). What this chapter has hoped to provide is a chronology that states that the deviance within is almost as old as the medium itself, but the evolution of gaming has allowed it to proliferate in various ways. The intention behind this text is that academics and policymakers will change this most myopic of viewpoints and turn their gaze towards real issues that exist outside of simplistic arguments of virtual violence impacting on real-life equivalence.

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4

DEATH BY SWAT: THE THREE ELEMENTS OF SWATTING

John Bahadur Lamb

The internet has become so ubiquitous in our lives that much of our commerce, socialising, dating and recreation are now carried out via electronic means (Katz & Rice, 2002). Such a growth in both traffic and time spent on the internet has seen new platforms emerge that allow individuals to easily cross the boundary from analogue reality to digital fantasy. This could be through the careful management of a social media page to present a fictitious account of one's life via platforms such as Facebook, *Twitter* and Instagram, or it could be the broadcasting of personal performance in order to experience celebrity via platforms such as *YouTube*, *Vimeo* and *Twitch.tv*. Whilst



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these digital portrayals are often carefully managed and do not reflect reality, there is a burgeoning market of consumers who are willing to monetise the performances which people share, and it is estimated that social media influencers generate \$1.7 billion for the global economy each year (Media Kix, 2017).

However, whilst money is a driving force of much of what occurs over the aforementioned digital platforms, there is a darker side to this growing digital market place. As has been well-documented, there are numerous illicit markets available on the internet which sell everything from fake handbags (Radon, 2012), weapons (Copeland, Wallin, & Holt, 2019), narcotics (Van Hout & Bingham, 2013) and even child abuse imagery (Davidson & Gottschalk, 2010). Yet we must not think of the internet as easily dividable into licit and illicit as there are numerous areas of human interaction played out via digital means which operate in the grey areas between the two. One such example of such liminal activities is the humble prank.

Usually harmless, pranks are often thought of as being a mildly mischievous act which embarrasses or inconveniences the victim (Merriam-Webster, 2020) for the amusement of an audience who are physically present at the scene of the prank. With the advent of the internet and the ability to publish or even live stream video, pranks are able to reach a much larger audience as physical presence is no longer needed. When this amplification of audience numbers comes the ability to monetise these online performances via advertising revenue earned as individual's accessing the web pages which are hosting the videos or live stream (Taylor, 2018). One good example of this process is that of Jackass who were a crew of pranksters who started their careers creating home-shot videos of pranks, were then talent-spotted and were given a TV show by MTV and many of whom have gone on to have successful multi-million dollar Hollywood careers (Spitz, 2010). However, the ability to make significant money from online

performances also means that this new market place is open to exploitation by those who are motivated by jealousy, revenge or who see an opportunity for criminal activity (Jaffe, 2016).

An example of one such marketplace is *Twitch.tv* which is a streaming website that allows users to create a page via which they can share live videos of them performing. These performances usually take the form of allowing audience members to watch the *Twitch.tv* page owner playing a computer game at a very high level whilst providing an audio commentary. This is then monetised via audience members being able to tip the performer, pay for a subscription to the performers feed and even buy merchandise from them (Twitch.tv, 2019). Significant amounts of money can be made by successful *Twitch.tv* performers, with the top level earners often becoming partners to the website and gaining corporate sponsorships worth thousands of dollars (Taylor, 2018).

Twitch.tv is a live stream which often shows a video feed of both the gameplay action and the performer with many fans choosing to watch certain performers because of the quality of the reactions that the performers have. This immersive visualisation creates an intimate consumptive space which allows those who are watching the stream to experience the gameplay as if they were physically present with the performer rather than separated by large distances. In turn, fans will often give performers larger tips or purchase more merchandise, should the performer engage with them personally either via audio chat or via text as they are performing. As such, the interactions between fans and performers can often be highly personalised with virtual communities forming around certain games, certain performers or even certain genres of game (Taylor, 2018). As with any community, these *Twitch.tv* groups often become quite tight knit with their own language, expected behaviours and shared jokes. It is this shared socialisation that creates the space in which virtual and

analogue realities begin to overlap and new forms of deviance can be seen to emerge with one such form of deviance being the act of ‘swatting’.

Swatting is a form of deviant behaviour, currently only present in the United States, which blurs the line between the prank, criminal activity designed to harm an individual and social policing effort. This is partially due to the motivations of the individual who triggers a swatting and partially because the outcome of swatting cannot be predicted in the same way that the outcome of most traditional pranks can. The act of swatting consists of an individual calling the police, identifying as somebody else who is perpetrating a situation that is almost certainly going to lead to the loss of innocent lives, such as an armed hostage situation. The individual then gives the address of the person they have identified themselves as and watches via a live stream online as the police respond (Calabro, 2018). Now, it is important to note that when swatting is used as a prank, it is a performative act which is specifically designed to be visually consumed by others who are already watching the victim via platforms such as *Twitch.tv*. This separates swatting from more traditional prank calls to the police, which did not have the visual element and which only provided deviant amusement to the individual who was actually making the phone call. Thus, swatting can be thought of as both a prank and a violent usurpation of the performative workspace of the victim which refocusses the audience’s attention away from the victim and onto the perpetrator who will often take ownership of the event via their online alias (Calabro, 2018). The reasons for using swatting to carry out such a refocussing of the performative work space through police-mediated violence can be numerous with the perpetrator seeking humour, revenge, to discredit the victim (FBI, 2008) or potentially to create a fake incident which serves a politically violent purpose (Enzweiler, 2015).

However, in order for the refocussing to be successful, the act of swatting needs to be a dramatic, almost cinematic event which captivates the online audience. In order to achieve this, the perpetrator purposefully chooses a crime which will see the police deploy a SWAT team. Standing for Special Weapons and Tactics, SWAT teams (and other Police Paramilitary Units (PPUs) under other names across the United States) were originally created in 1960s Los Angeles to respond to crimes which ordinary patrol officers are not equipped to deal with (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997). Since then these teams have spread across law enforcement in the United States and are highly trained, paramilitary style specialist officers who are tasked to the most dangerous situations. Such situations often require SWAT teams to undertake explosive entry into premises which involves the use of breaching charges or shotguns to force doors and stun grenades to temporarily disorientate the perpetrator so as to allow the officers to affect a safe arrest (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997). Should the SWAT team believe that life is in immediate danger, then the SWAT team members will not hesitate to use lethal force to ensure that individuals are protected from harm (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997). The perpetrators of swatting are aware of these capabilities and the cinematic effect that they can have and, thus, they only call in crimes which are likely to see a SWAT team respond.

There is an inherent danger to a SWAT team responding to what they believe to be a crime where loss of life is imminent. Whilst SWAT teams exist to protect life and have an inherent flexibility that allows them to respond as events play out on the ground, they are a paramilitary style force which has standard operating procedures (SOPs) which dictate their initial response (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997). Along with these SOPs is a rigorous training regime which sees the SWAT teams rehearse how they will carry out such things as hostage rescue or dealing with an active shooter (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997).

As [Waddington \(1993\)](#) has argued, these two things combine to create a military like culture where speed, aggression and surprise are favoured over the more traditional policing approach of talking in order to deescalate the situation. In turn, this creates an approach which sees the potential perpetrator as a bad guy or enemy who must be defeated in order to protect the potential victims ([Waddington, 1987](#)). If we then apply this to a swatting situation, it becomes unsurprising that in at least two instances the act of swatting has led to the death of the individual who has been victimised.

For example, in Wichita in 2017, local patrol officers ended up responding to a swatting incident that led to the loss of life for the victim, Mr Andrew Finch. An innocent individual, Andrew Finch, ended caught up in a minor disagreement over a \$1.50 bet that had been made on the outcome of an online match in the video game *Call of Duty: WWII* ([Sledgehammer Games, 2017](#); [Statt, 2017](#)). As a result of this disagreement, Tyler Barriss placed a call to local authorities claiming that he had shot his father in the head and was holding the rest of his family hostage whilst planning on killing himself and his hostages by setting fire to the property. Tyler Barriss then proceeded to give the 9-1-1 operator Andrew Finch's address hoping that the police would respond whilst he was watching the victim via the internet ([Koerner, 2018](#)). Oddly, Tyler Barriss contacted the police in Wichita three times via phone that night and this should have raised alarm bells with law enforcement because none of the calls were direct to 9-1-1. Instead, Tyler Barriss attempted to mask his real identity by calling Wichita City Hall and then asking to be transferred to 9-1-1, thus covering his out of state telephone number with a local one and obfuscating the fact that he was 1,400 miles away from the alleged incident ([Carrico, 2018](#)).

Such masking behaviour is common amongst hoax callers to the police who utilise such methods in order to avoid prosecution for wasting police time. Had the police realised

that the call did not originate locally, then they may have treated it as hoax or carried out some more in-depth checks before they tasked units to respond. However, this masking activity was not detected and an alert was issued to all patrol units to respond in order to attempt to save the lives of the hostages in what was thought to be a time critical event. This led to the nearest patrol unit arriving at the address which had been given and taking control rather than the specially trained officers of a SWAT unit that may have been expected (Leiker & Potter, 2018). Having officers not specifically trained in how to deal with such a situation highly likely contributed to Andrew Finch's death as there were several further discrepancies which could have helped to end the situation peacefully. First, after the patrol officers arrived at the scene of the supposed crime, Taylor Barriss was actually on the phone with the police dispatchers for over 16 minutes, yet no attempt was made to confirm that he was physically present (Burgess, 2018). Also, the physical description which had been given of the property did not match that of Andrew Finch's real life dwelling and, whilst unclear, it appears that the patrol officers did not know that the dispatchers were in contact with the supposed suspect (Burgess, 2018).

Not being specifically trained in hostage situations, the patrol officers were unaware that these things should have been checked (Leiker & Potter, 2018), and thus when Andrew Finch stepped outside his home in order to see what all the police were doing in the area, he was killed by a single gunshot to the chest. The officer who fired the shot did so because he believed that Andrew Finch was reaching for a weapon and posed an immediate threat to life (Koerner, 2018); the Police Department in question concurred with the officer's assessment of the situation and no charges have been brought against him for shooting Andrew Finch (Manna, 2018). It was only during the investigation into Andrew Finch's death that the

police realised that he had been the victim of a ‘swatting prank’ and started to investigate further. Once they did so, the police quickly traced the 9-1-1 calls which had reported the original fake crime and 25-year-old Taylor Barriss was arrested. In an attempt to deter future instances of swatting, Taylor Barriss was charged with having carried out an act of domestic terrorism and was sentenced to 20 years in prison (Madani, 2018).

The above example becomes even more tragic when one becomes aware that Andrew Finch was not the intended target of this swatting incident. The original dispute over *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017) had actually taken place between two online gamers – Casey Viner and Shane Gaskill. The pair took to *Twitter* in order to conduct their argument in public and during the argument Casey Viner threatened to kill Shane Gaskill (Madani, 2018). Casey Viner then contacted Taylor Barriss and provided an address that Shane Gaskill had claimed was his, but which was just one he picked at random which turned out to be that of Andrew Finch (Manna, 2018). Casey Viner received a 2-year community sentence, and, at the time of writing, Shane Gaskill is still awaiting sentencing (Leiker & Potter, 2018). The fact that an act of online braggadocio could lead to such a tragedy is something which should not have happened and that it did allows us to explore several structural deficiencies present in policing in the United States.

Swatting has been recognised as an act of online deviance since at least 2008 when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued a memorandum to police forces across the USA warning of the rising trend of these crimes (FBI, 2016). Despite such warnings, both the legal and policing response have been largely nonexistent with many states not possessing relevant legislation (Jaffe, 2016) and many police officers not being aware of the phenomenon (Jaffe, 2016). Andrew Finch’s

case proves that such a lack of awareness has lethal consequences because it compounds the issue of self-defence immunity laws which exist, in most states, to protect law enforcement from prosecution for events that happen whilst they are carrying out their appointed duty (*Graham V. Connor, 1989*). Specifically, these laws often allow officers who have been involved in deadly shootings to avoid prosecution because they believed that the discharging of their weapon was justifiable as an act of self-defence, an act in defence of colleague or an act in defence of the public (*Graham V. Connor, 1989*). In practice, such legal protection gives US law enforcement officers a huge level of discretion as to when they are legally allowed to discharge their firearms. Effectively, this creates a policing model whereby suspicion that a violent act may be about to take place can lead to immediate use of lethal force by the police. The decision about whether or not a situation is violent is wholly subjective with the police officer involved making the decision based upon their perception of events.

For example, in the shooting of Andrew Finch, the officer who took the shot, Patrolman Justin Rapp of the Wichita Police Department, took approximately 10 seconds from seeing Andrew Finch on the front porch to opening fire (*Koerner, 2018*). Since the shooting took place, Officer Rapp has given two differing accounts of why he opened fire with his immediate statement claiming he saw a hand gun in Andrew Finch's hand (*Madani, 2018*) and his testimony in the court case of Taylor Barriss stating that he only believed that Andrew Finch was reaching for a hand gun concealed at his waistband (*Koerner, 2018*). As the officer responsible for shooting Andrew Finch was not charged and has been cleared of any wrong doing (*Madani, 2018*), those studying this and other fatal police shootings must ask questions about how they came to be normalised. A potential answer

lies in exploring the creation of SWAT teams in more depth. As mentioned previously, SWAT teams were explicitly created to handle criminal threats to which normal patrol officers do not have the equipment or training to handle. Whilst pragmatically this sounds like a solution to a problem in a gun culture, like that present in the United States, it also comes with several issues. As [Kraska \(2007\)](#) argues, the largest of these issues is the militarisation that SWAT teams bring into policing and how they blur the traditional dichotomous line between military and civil actions. Such a blurring takes place not necessarily amongst SWAT members who, research shows ([Kraska, 2007](#)), understand that they are modelled after elite military Special Forces units and are not actually engaged in similar actions but instead amongst those officers who aspire to be SWAT. Thus, a situation arises whereby patrol officers potentially come to see themselves as frontline troops engaged in a war against crime. If one conceptualises their role as a police officer in such a way, then those accused of crimes become the enemy and all police/suspect interactions become inherently adversarial as they are thought of as being a battle between the forces of law and order and those of criminality.

In such a context, academic research ([Kraska, 2007](#); [Waddington, 1993](#)) has shown the likelihood of physical violence increases as the police officers start to consider themselves engaged in battle with mortal enemies who wish to kill them, their colleagues or members of the public. Such a potential cultural view amongst paramilitary style police units is compounded by the nature of the hoax situations which are called in by those attempting to have somebody swatted. As mentioned earlier, these hoax crimes are specifically invented to be as heinous as possible and often include accounts of multiple gruesome murders having already been carried out by the individual who is to be swatted. Being

tasked to respond to such an event, it is not hard to imagine the officers, who may already see themselves as engaged in battle, would arrive in a vengeful mood determined to stop the alleged offender from hurting any more innocents. So, whilst the lack of knowledge and training in this phenomenon contributed to the death of Andrew Finch, these deficiencies also speak to a wider difficulty, faced by law enforcement, in understanding how the virtual actions of individuals can carry over into analogue reality. Conversely, the ability to transcend the virtual and manifest in the analogue by exploiting the vengefulness that the police may feel is clearly very well understood by those who use online platforms to make a living with swatting being explicitly referred to as a means of punishing behaviour which oversteps the boundaries accepted by the online community. For example, one online gamer gave an interview about swatting where they described it as a means of physically controlling online behaviours:

When you're on the internet and your actions have little weight in real life, and then suddenly that translates into something as physically heavy as a swatting, it makes you realize the weight of your actions on a computer a lot more than you normally would. It did re-establish boundaries on the internet for them and remind them that just because they were behind a computer talking shit, it didn't mean they were untouchable.

(Koerner, 2018).

If we accept the above statement and consider it from a wider sociological viewpoint, we can understand the decision-making process behind swatting as being an attempt to police behaviours and interactions between online community members. In much the same way that family's police the

behaviour of small children by imposing physical punishments, such as groundings or timeouts, it appears that the online gaming community has developed methods for policing the Wild West (Allweiss, 1999), which is the internet. The Wild West analogy has been used to describe social interaction online due to the ease in which abusive behaviour which would not be tolerated in real life can be directed at people without any apparent consequence due to the anonymity afforded by usernames and avatars (Allweiss, 1999). At its most extreme, this abusive behaviour becomes known as trolling which consists of the specific targeting of people with very extreme abusive behaviour (Bishop, 2013). Often coordinated amongst a set of trolls, trolling is explicitly designed to cause harm to the victim with many trolls expressing enjoyment at the idea that their posts have led to physical or psychological harm having been caused (Bishop, 2013).

Such behaviour is destructive and can create highly toxic environments which spiral away from the topic which they were originally created to be about (Goodwin, 1994). However, the ability for the other members of the online community to do anything about a troll problem is traditionally nearly impossible. The anonymity they allow and ease with which new usernames can be created means that the banning of members from online communities does very little to limit troll behaviour (Bishop, 2013). In turn, this leaves online communities vulnerable and unable to do much more than either accept trolls as part of the virtual experience or for the nontroll members to migrate away to other platforms or service providers. This migration often cause a fragmentation of the online community with not all members successfully moving and it also does not limit the effect of trolls as they are often able to locate the users they are targeting across multiple platforms as evidence by Taylor

Barriss, Casey Viner and Shane Gaskill starting their argument on *Twitch.Tv* and then moving to *Twitter* (Madani, 2018). Yet, swatting can be reimagined away from being a prank designed to humiliate and towards being a form of online social policing with the public humiliation of being confronted by armed police whilst visible over a social media feed being the equivalent of the tarring and feathering that was carried out in premodern communities to punish minor infractions (Emsley, 2010). Therefore, swatting can be thought of as a retributive form of social justice utilised by those members of online communities which believe that they have been unfairly victimised, either by trolls or by the actions of a community member leading to loss of status or money. Unlike the banning of usernames or other virtual punishments which could be handed out, swatting is an inherently physical phenomenon which has real-world consequences for the targeted individual. This means that when an act of swatting is carried out, the motivations may not be as simple as revenge, humour or to cause humiliation it may be motivated by a desire to police what is in effect a lawless online community.

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted to show that swatting is a multifaceted and nuanced phenomenon that can be carried out for a variety of reasons. The fact that the act of swatting can be motivated by such disparate ideas as humiliation and humour means that it is likely to remain a popular activity for online communities to engage in. When these varied motivations are combined with the inherent anonymity of online activity and the implicit harm that swatting can cause the victimised individual, it is hard to see a downward trend in its occurrence. Such a reduction in this phenomenon is only likely to take place if major changes are made to legislation and policing at both a state and federal level across the United States.

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ADDICTION, GAMBLING AND GAMING: CHASING THE DIGITAL DRAGON

Melindy Brown and Saabirah Osman

INTRODUCTION

An increase in media coverage has publicised the lengths to which young members of the gaming community will go when playing online games, in order to maximise their chances of success. Additionally, recent technological advancements and the heightened availability of video games have enabled such forms of entertainment to have increasingly become a staple of everyday life for a growing proportion of the population (Chikhani, 2015; Tiplady, 2003). This combined increase in



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technological advancement and availability of video games has enhanced opportunities for the gaming industry to gain more profit from consumers and consumers a wider array of ways to progress within video games (Stuart, 2016). As such, it is therefore recognised that the virtual ‘materials’ that gamers are purchasing within the online realm, in order to enhance their chances of victory within the ludodrome, are being bought with real money rather than rewards gained throughout the game (Valkyrie, 2017). One key example of this is the inclusion of ‘loot boxes’ within video games. Loot boxes are virtual containers that allow users to make in-game purchases with the opportunity to gain random items or modifications in the game on the basis of chance (Woodhouse, 2019). With this in mind, this chapter will explore whether video games, and as such the gaming industry, can be considered to be facilitating underage and unregulated gambling. Furthermore, it will consider the impact on users of gambling for in-game currency and interrogate potential reasons behind their lack of regulation.

ADDICTION AND GAMBLING

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) has officially identified video game addiction as a mental health disorder. WHO argues that this type of addiction causes games to take an increasing priority over a person’s other life activities, regardless of the negative implications that it may result in (WHO, 2018). Traditionally, addiction is defined as ‘*not having control over doing, taking or using something to the point where it could be harmful to [a person]*’ (National Health Service, 2015). Many people have raised questions regarding whether video games can be classed as an activity that one can become addicted to, with some regarding it as somewhat elusive or implausible (Pontes, 2018). One of the key factors in

this argument is situated within what criminologists would categorise as biological positivism, regarding the level of dopamine released when a person is playing a video game, in comparison to other activities or substances that a person can become addicted to. In a large-scale international study of 932 participants, based on testing the premise of Internet gaming disorders as psychiatric disorders, it was found that at most 1% of all the participants may have a chance at exhibiting addictive characteristics to these games. Furthermore, they established that other activities such as gambling were far more addictive (Przybylski, Weinstein, & Murayama, 2016). As such, this chapter positions the discussion of addiction, by focusing on attributes within video games that can mimic addiction, such as the rise of pseudo-gambling within video games.

GAMBLING AND VIDEO GAMES

As the focus of this chapter is on gambling within video games, it is necessary to explore gambling as an activity in more depth. There has been a significant development and growth in gambling over the years; according to Abbott (2017), this growth has been fuelled by the Internet on a global scale. Whilst gambling can be perceived as a hobby or something ‘fun’ to take part in for many people within society, there are some who gamble to excess (Raymen, 2016; Walker, 1989). Gambling becomes an issue when an individual invests time and money they cannot afford and for some of these people, it is suggested that they will sometimes turn to abortive measures to cut back on engaging with this activity (Walker, 1989). As such, it is important for this chapter to discuss what factors of gambling can be identified as addictive. Whilst general gambling, in one sense, is linked to glamour and the ‘Las Vegas lifestyle’, heavy gambling comes with its own stigma: problem gambling, excessive gambling,

compulsive gambling, pathological gambling and addictive gambling (Walker, 1989). However, Walker (1989, p. 185) continues and highlights that not all of these labels can be applied correctly to gambling. According to Rankin (1982, p. 185),

... those who are involved with this problem conceptualize excessive gambling as a form of addiction and have borrowed heavily from the alcoholism literature in particular, to guise their thought and their practices.

Walker (1989) then suggests that if heavy gambling has similar characteristics to other forms of addiction, then general theories of addiction may have the ability to explain behaviour's associated with heavy gambling. To add, therapies that are effective for other addictions may also be effective to heavy gamblers, specifically pathological gamblers; this, however, may add pressures for change in law that are connected to gambling related crimes (Walker, 1989).

Abbott (2017) supports the claim that heavy gambling and other addictive disorders are similar and highlights that issues with gambling continue to grow dramatically. In 2017, adults with gambling problems ranged from 0.1% to 6.0%, which was two or three times more than those who experienced less serious sub-clinical problems (Abbott, 2017). According to this finding, it is clear to see that heavy gambling has become far more problematic over the years, which could be situated within the increasing embeddedness of such leisure pursuits within society (Raymen, 2016). To demonstrate, pathological gambling was first recognised and listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM) – III* in 1980 (Commission on Behavioural and Social Sciences and Education, 1999). If we fast forward to the fifth edition (DSM V), this was then renamed to 'gambling disorder' and placed under a new category 'Addiction and Related Disorder'

(Rennert, Denis, Peer, Gelernter, & Kranzlet, 2014). For clarity, a gambling disorder is generally described as a ‘... *repeated problematic gambling behaviour that cause(s) significant problems or distress*’ (Wang, 2018). For those where gambling becomes an addiction, they often find themselves craving the act, which is similar to the craving that occurs for those who are addicted to alcohol or substances (Wang, 2018). Heavy gambling that becomes addictive may result in major problems with finances, relationships, work and legal issues (Wang, 2018). However, it is worth noting that many people see heavy gambling as being a superficial addiction, in turn weakening the strength of the term addiction (Walker, 1989). Similarly, therapy may be disregarded and there may be a reduction in the importance of changing laws associated with gambling-related crimes, due to the misleading viewpoints of gambling not always being seen as a real addiction (Walker, 1989). With this in mind, perhaps the nature of heavy gambling needs to be examined to assess where the act can result in an addiction. For the purpose of this chapter, the authors have deemed it appropriate to associate heavy gambling with addiction, due to its recognition within the DSM V and its long-standing status as being seen as a form of addiction.

The above already identifies some problems with controlling what Raymen (2016) terms lifestyle gambling due to the possibility of laws being reviewed. This would not be the only obstacle faced when reviewing how to regulate such gambling. However, before tackling this argument, it is important to situate how gambling has been policed, or in essence ‘controlled’, historically. Drawing back to Abbott’s (2017) claim that gambling has grown globally through the use of the Internet, it is appropriate to start with how people gambled with the aid of technology and how this was controlled at the start. In the mid-1980s, betting shops were allowed to have televisions to show races, with the help of further gambling legislations; this was easier to control in the

physical world as users would present their identification (Durham & Hashimoto, 2010). In the late 1990s, the Internet opened new doors for gambling and introduced online bingo and poker sites, resulting in the increasing normalisation of such leisure pursuit within a growing section of the population (Raymen, 2016). However, in order for people to play, they needed to provide credit card details and identification to prove they were over the legal age (Durham & Hashimoto, 2010).

Traditionally, gambling was controlled and policed through showing one's identification, as briefly highlighted; through the development of technology, the individual would need to provide their credit card details and/or identification to prove their age via online platforms (Banks, 2016). There has been some conversation around the issues that the police face when it comes to policing online platforms; however, there seems to be some confusion and ongoing debates of who is responsible for this (Cohen, 2017). The government indicate to society that it is almost impossible to police online platforms and in this case policing online gambling (Fuller, 2006). One of the key factors we can consider is that it is very difficult to implement, and as such, police age-restricted activities within the online realm, such as online gambling (Fabiansson, 2016). This becomes increasingly difficult when we consider the fact that age restrictions vary across the world. With this in mind, there are many questions around who is responsible for ensuring that age restrictions are adhered to when people engage in games across international borders. As such, it is not necessarily possible to police online gambling, as the globalised network is actually quite complicated (Fabiansson, 2016). For instance, if an individual from the United Kingdom used an Australian website, questions would then be raised as to who is responsible for policing it. One way to understand this is through discussing capitalism. It can be argued that capitalism is underpinned via a bid for hegemony through

nation states and the rich and powerful, with the rest of society falling in line via necessity over the last few centuries, and as result, enabling society to conceptualise a lived reality not within the capital nexus (Taylor, 2016). In saying this, it is financially beneficial for a state to perpetuate the normalisation of gambling to generate profit for companies which operate within its territory. As demonstrated earlier, the gambling industry generates billions of pounds, and as such businesses are providing a large volume of capital for the government and therefore if proper policing is in place, it not only reduces the overall profits that can be made by the capital state but also increases the outgoings that must also be spent (Banks, 2016).

Drawing back to the chapter's theme and reflecting on what has been discussed, online gambling continues to grow through the development of technology and capitalism, with it now having seen a growth in to online games. This presence within online games is a further platform that can potentially lead to people engaging in addictive behaviour through the process of problem gambling. For example, there is now a market for selling virtual currency in digital games (Guo, Hao, Mukhopadhyay, & Sun, 2019), with reports of children using their parents/carers credit cards to make purchases to feed their urge of gambling currency (Kleinman, 2019a). Drawing back to the work of Raymen (2016), who highlights the relationship between money is pathologically de-sublimated, decimating its symbolic value within the context of adults gambling, it is reasonable to posit from this positionality that adolescence (and the use of their guardians money) would viably exacerbate such issues. As such, many now believe that video games are enabling children to engage with gambling behaviour (Hern, 2017). To understand this in more depth, however, we must understand how gambling currency developed within video games.

'LOOT BOXES' IN VIDEO GAMES

The gaming industry has seen a shift over the years in terms of purchasable content for various gaming consoles. For example, previous generations of consoles, such as the Nintendo 64, required users to purchase cartridges in order to own the game that they desired (Steven, 2002). Whereas, in more recent times, gamers have the option to sign up to networks such as the PlayStation Network, where they can play online games or download content from the PlayStation Store (Loguidice & Loguidice, 2012). This advance in technology has increasingly led to developers including downloadable content within their games, in order to increase profit after the initial purchase of the game (Stuart, 2016). This move towards downloadable content has seen some consumers tempted by the increased options within games. Some have compared this type of video game sale, as the initial game resembling an economic car, of which purchasing downloadable content is necessary in order to fix it up (Aires, 2010). Although gamers are provided with the option as to whether they purchase these extras, it is now the case that options that would have previously been complementary are now at a premium price (Paul, 2013). As such, to ensure the game matches your own specification, certain packages need to be purchased, therefore causing some users to be at an economic disadvantage even within the ludodromes, thus terrestrial inequalities transition into the ludodromes experience. It could then be argued that in order for the consumer to get the full and immersive experience within the gaming product they have purchased, they must repeatedly pay more. Some video game organisations, and as a result of these organisations, the government, have large volumes of their revenue originating from the sales of digital content (Yin-Poole, 2019a) with Rockstar Games in the United Kingdom even been given tax allowance for their proposed

contribution to culture (HM Treasury et al., 2014; Taxwatch, 2019).

One key example of these concerns can be linked to ‘loot boxes’ within video games. Loot boxes are virtual containers that allow users to make in-game purchases with the opportunity to gain random items or modifications in the game on the basis of chance (Woodhouse, 2019). As highlighted by some of the examples earlier, gambling within video games has been part of the culture for a long time, hence the implementation of ‘loot boxes’ into video games by their producers, unsurprising. Loot boxes, particularly, have been present within video games since the mid-2000s and have increased in popularity over recent years (Brooks & Clark, 2019). However, what has come under great debate in regard to ‘loot boxes’ is their resemblance to gambling when used by gamers. The fact that ‘loot boxes’ require the user to spend real money, with no guarantee of what reward they will receive, places gamers in a similar scenario to when gambling like practices are used separate to the online video game realm. As such, the ability for a person to take part in ‘pseudo-gambling’ through video games leaves them open to the implications that can occur from excessive traditional gambling. Gamers often do not have an awareness of what they will gain from the loot box, with the most desirable prizes, often being the rarest (Brooks & Clark, 2019). For example, within FIFA 19 (EA Sports, 2018), there are trading card-style packets available, with the most expensive ‘gold’ pack costing around £1.20 of real money; however, the chance of winning a top player is around 4.5% (Acres, 2019). As such, to maximise their chances of success, gamers are encouraged to spend more money (Griffiths, 2018a). This has been reiterated by Zende and Cairns (2018) who determined after studying 7,422 gamers that not only do loot boxes within video games have the ability to act as a gateway

towards problems with gambling but they can also cause those with pre-existing issues with gambling to be drawn towards spending money on loot boxes. Furthermore, the study concluded that the attributes that make loot boxes similar to gambling could have a key impact on gambling severity, as the study did not draw a strong connection between gambling and the purchase of other in-game items where the element of risk is not present (Zendle & Cairns, 2019). Brooks and Clark (2019) support these findings, as their study found that gamers who are drawn to using 'loot boxes' within online games often are people who have a closer resemblance to problem gamblers than the description of a problem gamer. Further to this, they found a correlation between users having extensive engagement with loot boxes and measures of problem gambling (Brooks & Clark, 2019). They argued that potential justifications for this were that those who have a predisposition to gambling are more likely to be vulnerable to loot boxes and that the use of loot boxes may encourage a person to engage with risky gambling behaviours (Brooks & Clark, 2019).

It has been argued that spending money on general micro-transactions, such as the purchase of loot boxes, is more likely by people under the age of 25 years (Gusmao et al., 2019). With this in mind, loot boxes have been normalised within the gaming community, and as such a process that consumers are aware of from a young age, with its popularity being particularly present amongst young people. In regarding it as part of the culture, some may say that this is a key sign of parents financially enabling this to occur, as a way of supporting the online social interactions of their children, without realising the broader context of this involvement. In May 2018, an Ipsos survey reported that 40% of parents, who had children that played video games, allowed their children to spend money on video games, under supervision or with a set upper spending

limits made clear (Belam, 2018). However, as noted earlier with the discussions of young people using their parent's bank cards to make these purchases, it is not always the case that parents are aware of the amount their children are spending. As such it could be said that this is highlighting how, in one way, that these loot boxes can encourage young people to move to criminal activity such as fraud, in order to obtain these loot boxes. This in itself raises questions around how society as a whole is facilitating deviancy. The fact that children use their parent's bank cards without permission reiterates the viewpoint of Wall (2007), who argues that cybercrime is not merely facilitated by technology, but also by social, legal and economic drivers. The lack of regulations in place and the social and economic drivers engrained within society in essence play a part in the actions highlighted here. Nevertheless, it is clear that parents are not fully aware of the impact of loot boxes, and therefore suggestions have been made such as content descriptors and responsible spending limits on games that include loot boxes have been put forward as potential suggestions to help parents (Drummond, Sauer, & Hall, 2019).

Regardless of this lack of parental awareness, the extent to which loot boxes are being used within video games, among young people in particular, is one of great discussion. To start, loot boxes or virtual items of a similar nature are present within many popular video games, such as: FIFA 19 (EA Sports, 2018), Middle-earth: Shadow of War (Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment, 2017), Overwatch (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) and Star Wars Battlefront 2 (Electronic Arts, 2017) (Griffiths, 2018a), heightening the access that young people have to them. A report by the Gambling Commission (2018) found that in a study consisting of young people aged 11–16 year in Great Britain, just under a third of them claimed to have opened loot boxes in order to get other in-game items, within either online video games or app-based

games. Despite the issues raised regarding the likeliness of loot boxes to gambling and the clear use of them by young people, loot boxes are highly unregulated. To start, one of the largest video game publishers Electronic Arts (EA) disagrees with the ethical concerns that have been raised regarding 'loot boxes', arguing that loot boxes are both quite ethical and fun, and work in the same way as the '*surprise mechanics present within popular children's toys, such as Kinder Egg*' (Webb, 2019). Further to this, the United Kingdom's Gambling Commission has reported that they are not able to regulate loot boxes. This is due to arguments that there is no official way to monetise the prize that is in them and therefore causing them to not meet the Gambling Act's definition for what constitutes as gambling (Kleinman, 2019b). This is a similar argument to that provided in America, where The Entertainment Software Ratings Board states that even if a gamer receives an item that they do not wish to receive, they will still be guaranteed to receive new in-game content (BBC Newsround, 2018). However, it has been found that some games have links to online market platforms, where gamers have the ability to trade and sell the items gained from the opening of loot boxes, of which they can establish a monetary value as a result (Brooks & Clark, 2019). Brooks and Clark (2019) found that within their study, a third of participants had sold a loot box item at one point in time. Additionally, there are independent websites, including LOOT.farm and skins.cash, where gamers can exchange their in-game purchases or virtual currency for real money (Griffiths, 2018a). Furthermore, the items that are received as prizes of loot boxes are often within financial comparisons, less valuable than the price paid for the initial loot box (Griffiths, 2018b).

Despite both the United Kingdom and America continuing to allow the use of loot boxes on the basis of it not being illegal, other countries have outlawed or put restrictions on their use within online games. For example, Belgium have

made the use of loot boxes when gamers have to use real money to purchase them, completely illegal, on the basis that they breach gambling rules (Griffiths, 2018a). Further to this, Belgium launched a criminal investigation against the EA, after the company refused to make necessary adjustments to their version of loot boxes, in order to meet Belgium's gambling laws (Yin-Poole, 2019b). Since the investigation which started in 2018, the EA has finally stopped selling FIFA points, months after other publishers such as 2K Games, Blizzard and Valve disabled loot boxes in their Belgian video games (Yin-Poole, 2019b). China is a further example of a country that has seen a link between loot boxes and gambling. In China, rules have been put in place that require gaming companies to make it clear the exact chance they have of getting rare items within the loot boxes to ensure that gamers are fully aware (BBC Newsround, 2018). Further concerns have arisen in Australia. The Environment and Communications References Committee completed an inquiry in to loot boxes and determined that due to the gambling-related harms, particularly for children and vulnerable adults, a comprehensive review of loot boxes is required to be undertaken by the Australian Government (ECRCAS, 2018). This is supported by a study in Australia that established that loot boxes not only meet the psychological criteria to fall in to the category of gambling but also cause the same excitable reaction that occurs from traditional gambling (ECRCAS, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, it has been highlighted that profitable gains can result from the development of technology and capitalism – this has particularly been seen through the rise in online gambling, which since progressed to the ludodrome.

Within this capitalist state, there is an increased competition between individual gamers wanting to succeed, and individual companies wanting to maximise profits. It has become clear within this chapter that these two forces within the market have led to features linked to gambling-like behaviour being implemented into video games, such as loot boxes. The literature that specifically focuses on loot boxes is fairly new, and therefore it would be premature to say that there is a causal relationship between loot boxes and problem gambling. However, it does show that the early academic literature is on the whole supporting the idea that the purchase of loot boxes mimics the attributes of gambling and as such can lead to the negative implications of problem gambling (Brooks & Clark, 2019; Zendle & Cairns, 2019). It further indicates that this research is supporting the perspective that previous experiences of problem gambling heighten the risk of loot box purchases (Brooks & Clark, 2019; Zendle & Cairns, 2019). Taking this standpoint, it can be argued that there is a connection between addictive behaviour and video games; however, not in the traditional argument of individuals becoming addicted to the video games specifically, but rather through in-game pseudo-gambling. As stated, the literature regarding loot boxes is in its early stages, and as such further research needs to be conducted to strengthen the arguments regarding association with problem gambling. However, it is clear that there are competing views across the world in regard to whether, and if so how, loot boxes should be regulated under the premise that they are a form of in-game gambling (BBC Newsround, 2018; ECRCS, 2018; Griffiths, 2018a). As established, despite these debates, the United Kingdom is one of the locations in the world that does not regulate loot boxes (Kleinman, 2019b). As such, this ability to gain further revenue post original sale exposes the way in which consumer capitalism culture in the United Kingdom situates profit as the priority. Without

regulations in place, the continuation of loot boxes within video games is likely to continue, due to the large profit margins they provide to the producers as forms of downloadable content (Yin-Poole, 2019a). A result of this, however, is that the early concerns raised within the literature regarding loot boxes and problem gambling are likely to be overlooked by video game producers over the fear of lost profits.

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6

THE DEMOCRATISATION OF WHITE-COLLAR CRIMINALITY IN VIDEO GAMES

Craig Kelly and Adam Lynes

INTRODUCTION

Fraud is generally perceived as an occupationally related crime committed by individuals whom are both powerful and wealthy. Sutherland famously urged criminologists to acknowledge such harms caused by said powerful actors, rather than continuing the disciplines persistent and unrelenting focus upon crimes conducted via marginalised, lower class individuals. As [Huff, Desilets, and Kane \(2010\)](#) detail elements of white-collar criminality, such as cases of fraud and embezzlement are evident throughout historical records dating as far back as Ancient Greece. Despite this,



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they note the public fail to recognise the seriousness of white-collar crime (Huff et al., 2010), negating the implications and risk due to the lack of physical threat and proximity in comparison to other forms of organised criminality (Croall, 2001). Alongside the disavow of the harms from the proliferation of fraud, Clarke (1990) highlights the differing approach to such offences by criminal justice agencies which often fail to hold such offenders to account in the same manner as non-white-collar offenders. The development of information technology has exacerbated such issues. Despite the fact that in 2016, one in six of all crimes in the United Kingdom were online-based fraud (Spiller, 2019) costing each household an average of just over 200 pounds, both investigative agencies and legislation have been slow to effectively address this rapidly evolving aspect of a traditional, yet under recognised form of criminality. Grabonsky, Smith, and Dempsey (2001, p. 185) highlight that this is partially attributable to legislation being cumbersome to alter and develop, whereas technological development is not. Combining the continuing proliferation of white-collar cyber criminality with the disregard for recognising realist perspectives of video game-related deviancy, criminality and harm, it is becoming increasingly common for acts of fraud to be an aspect of the leisure community.

This chapter seeks to highlight the various emerging forms of fraud that can be identified within the remit of video games and situate such instances within existing literature, contextualising throughout with various case studies. The case studies demonstrate how fraud can be identified throughout various aspects of atypical criminality as well as a change in the criminal undertakers and victims. The chapter concludes proposing that the myopic approach to recognising the harm in video games (evident in the severe lack of academically suitable references offered within the chapter) combined with the wider issues of fraud recognition and cybercrime has resulted in the democratisation of fraud at varying levels of deviancy and criminality

much in the same way we have witnessed in the United Kingdom's drug market.

WHITE-COLLAR CRIME AND THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY

As touched upon within the chronology chapter offered earlier in this book, during the early development of the video game industry it was relatively commonplace for companies to be accused of intellectual copyright infringements. We can deduce from this regularity that within the highly competitive market, forms of white-collar crime were to some degree a mainstay of the industry from the offset. It should be recognised; however, such acts of deviancy are commonplace in the majority of technology-related industries which offer a potential for large sums of profit to be made. Situating this within the literature on forms of white-collar criminality, however, from drawing upon [Punch's \(1996\)](#) typology of white-collar criminality to specify that organisational deviance is a staple in some areas of the industry. Utilising Punch's explanation of this subcategory of the typology alongside the regularity of court cases from competing companies over similarities within their marketed products, it is apparent that deception is likely routinely deployed to achieve organisational goals.

White-collar criminality also becomes a recurrent theme within various video games. Following on from the 2014 release of *Watch Dogs* ([Ubisoft, 2014](#)), *Watch Dogs 2* ([Ubisoft, 2016](#)) allowed gamers to navigate an open world as a 'hacktivist'. The sandbox style game's focus was to allow the player to complete missions utilising lethal violence in the form of shotguns and likewise weaponry. Alternatively, the player could choose to use non-lethal force, deploying a taser in order to incapacitate enemy characters. Unlike other games, however, *Watch Dogs 2* ([Ubisoft, 2016](#)) and its predecessor allowed the

player to hack into almost every form of electronic technology within the open world, allowing the player to complete the entire game purely through various forms of cyber criminality. Further to this, the games included missions centred around various forms of white-collar criminality including election fraud. In the Saints Row (THQ, 2006) series, optional side missions include insurance fraud. Within the scope of this, the player is instructed to *'throw yourself into harm's way to earn cash and respect'*. Within Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar, 2018), the character is regularly accosted by various 'beggars'. Much of these non-playable characters are presented to have various disabilities, mainly blindness, as the justification for them requesting a dollar from the player. If the player donates the money requested they gain 'honour'. The honour system being rather pivotal to the game play as the level of honour (or deficit of honour) that the player has invariably influences which route the story line takes. Some of the players which request money, however, are not blind but are attempting to deceive the player. A quick search of YouTube presents a litany of videos in which players point a gun in the individual's face only for the NPC to panic and flee.

Within another of Rockstar's seminal works is Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar, 2013). When released the levels of realism in terms of game mechanics were in various ways unrivalled by other console games. The developers created an intricate world, going as far as developing a 'real' financial market which could be influenced via the player at key points within the game (Rockstar, 2013). Notably, within the main story mode were a series of assassination missions in which the player killed individuals for monetary gain. Many of the missions, though, involved targeting various businessmen. The game rather blatantly alluded to a mobile phone/social networking company in which you detonated an explosive device from inside the CEO's phone during a press conference, resulting in his death (Rockstar, 2013). As a

background to such missions, however, it was insinuated that if you bought stock using in-game currency for the victim's main competitor company, you would profit much more from the mission. Whilst keeping its atypical violence-centric gameplay, the developers had managed to intertwine aspects of pseudo-price fixing (Rockstar, 2013). Away from console platforms and on personal computers games such as *The Low Road* (XGen Studios, 2018), more white-collar criminality can be located. The point and click game, which gained lacklustre reviews, was premised upon industrial espionage. *Uplink* (Introversion Software, 2001) also centres on corporate espionage with the user acting in the role of a hacker. Crucially within *Uplink* (Introversion Software, 2001), the player is encouraged to decide how to approach a hacking career, participating in a global techno-war or freelancing their skills for profit.

MMORPG AND THE DEMOCRATISATION OF WHITE-COLLAR CRIMINALITY IN THE LUDODROME

MMORPG stands for Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. Such games are usually, though not solely, played on personal computers rather than on game consoles such as the PlayStation 4 or Xbox One. The games regularly attract a legion of fans, with games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) being the most well known. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) is reported to attract around five million players worldwide at any given time since its release in 2004. MMORPG games are different from the usual platform games which are primarily discussed within this book. The games do not have set 'missions' with an aim to complete the game. Rather the developers add missions/tasks to help the player increase their characters' level. The game is

consistently changing, however, so whilst a player is logged off, events in the gaming world can still have an effect on their character. In the simplest terms, MMORPG games allow an alternative digital world to exist, with players interacting with one another and even going as far as setting up their own businesses to cater for other players. Such levels of realism are unparalleled, with the gaming companies allowing players to influence the content created substantially. This, however, brings forth a realism which is otherwise unseen in technology-based leisure pursuits, within individuals from all over the world, each with different objectives and motives enabled to exercise their influence as they see fit. The worlds are, despite being filled with characters such as goblins and wizards, very similar to reality in some regards.

It is at this stage we can begin to see white-collar criminality begin to blend into the world of MMORPGs utilising a cultural criminological approach (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2015). In the series four of *The Big Bang Theory* (Warner Brothers Television, 2010), Sheldon is targeted via a cybercriminal on *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). In the episode, 'The Zarneki Incursion' (s4e19, Warner Brothers Television, 2010), the opening scene is Sheldon being interviewed by a perplexed police officer. Sheldon had contacted the Pasadena Police Department (after the FBI hand hung up on him) and unsuccessfully attempted to file a police report as his game account had been hacked with his virtual weapons and in-game currency stolen. The police officer explains to Sheldon that he does not hold jurisdiction within the online world of 'Azeroth'. The remainder of the episode focuses upon the main characters tracing the IP address of the hacker and driving to San Francisco to confront him. Upon a quick scan of Google, however, such instances appear to be a regular occurrence in the *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) domain. These are of varying degrees of sophistication though, with

some including the use of computer coding to enable such virtual thefts and other relying heavily upon variations of social engineering to deceive the victims. By 2015, such deviant actions have begun to be recognised by senior policing figures. Dr Saunders of the National Crime Agency specifically referenced cases of ‘swords’ being stolen via hackers in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) as an increasingly common precursor to more serious cyber-criminality committed by the individuals later (Peachey, 2015). As such, David Cameron’s intellectual property advisor sought for equal sentences for those whom have committed ‘real-world and online theft’ (Peachey, 2015). The reason for this being that the virtual weaponry and other items characters obtain within *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) are often purchased using real currency for virtual objects. It should be noted, however, that online articles and noticeboards discussing similar transgressions are also evident in other MMORPG games such as *Runescape* (JageX Software, 2001).

This transition of widespread fraudulent actions within online gaming raises multiple interesting developments within the discussion of white-collar criminality and video games. The onset of mass interaction within the virtual spaces has effectually allowed a democratised version of white-collar criminality to proliferate. Whilst in the offline world such crimes are generally the preserve of those with high social capital, which facilitates the deception that underpins such crimes; in the virtual world this is not the case. Success in video games is not relative to success in ‘normal’ walks of life. Whether a 15-year-old child, a highly educated adult or an individual who would usually be deemed rather unsuccessful and marginalised within main stream society, all have the ability to reach the upper echelons of the respective MMORPG ludodromes. Further to this, the importance of appearing to fit in within the area fraudulent offences are committed are omitted due to the use of

avatars, thus they can legitimately present at the scene with relative ease. Insider knowledge would be relatively easy to come by if the individual has embedded themselves within the online realm for a relatively short period of time. Finally, just as white-collar crime generally takes place in private is highly relevant. Whilst the acts are committed within virtual online networks, the players targeted are generally situated within the comfort of their own home thus are likely less guarded. Within this, the chapter proposes that video games have facilitated the democratisation of white-collar criminality, allowing it to be a viable form of deviancy to an ever increasing number of individuals that choose to exercise their special liberty to gain status and virtual material object within games. As [Croall \(2001\)](#) states, the ambiguity of legal and criminal status is of importance. As shown within the reference to *The Big Bang Theory* and the comments from senior members of the National Crime Agency, such deviant acts are indeed ambiguous.

Further to the changes within those using white-collar criminality for their gain, the population that engage with MMORPG as a form of leisure are usually not of the same demographics that are targeted by white-collar criminals in the traditional sense. Increasingly, white-collar criminality as well as cyber criminality targets those whom are less technologically adept within instances, it is aimed at individuals and not businesses. The demographics of MMORPGs usually being relatively young and technologically savvy ([De Silva, 2019](#); [Yee, 2004](#)); from this we can also hypothesise a shift in the targets of such criminal transgressions.

Some would argue that such deviant transgressions such as those discussed within the *World of Warcraft* game are not important enough to warrant the attention of criminological study. Drawing upon Clarke's recognition of white-collar criminality and how they are handled reflecting the special circumstances of these offences, however, the author would disagree. It is put forth that such games are reflections of

society more generally. As Tudor (2019) notes the late-capitalist landscape emphasises sovereignty within neo-liberal economics and consumer capitalism. Investigating fraud, Tudor notes that the harmful outcomes of such behaviour are often rendered secondary considerations to the primacy ideals such as sovereignty and competition (Tudor, 2019). Drawing upon the proposal of the democratisation of such deviant acts within the ludodrome, we propose we can observe a reflection of terrestrial acts within the white-collar criminality of MMORPGs quite clearly. However, the examples put forth so far have been of a relatively minor magnitude. As Tudor (Tudor, 2019) states, both material and symbolic survival is at the fore of the individual's sense of sovereignty, thus failure to achieve this must be negated entirely. Acts of white-collar criminality in video games could be seen as a way in which the individual seeks to regain control of such in the virtual realm once being unable to grasp it within the real world, something we must consider whilst accounting for the increasingly alienating and inaccessible consumer culture in modern society (Hall, Winlow, & Ancrum, 2008). As Veblen (2005) and Hall et al. (2008) highlight, the symbolism of conspicuous wealth is of increasing importance within the demography we are discussing, and as Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) puts forth, within the ludodromes the individual can exercise their darkest desires wantonly. In such liminal realities as the MMORPG ludodromes alongside the other areas, we have presented variations of white-collar criminality embedded within, ranging from the industry in general, the coding of the games and the online communities. The MMORPG, *Eve Online* (CCP Games, 2003), however, is perhaps the foremost example of such cases and is worthy of attention within a discussion that seeks to recognise such forms of deviancy and being normalised and proliferated within video games.

EVE ONLINE: PONZI SCHEMES IN THE
LIMINAL REALITY

EVE Online (CCP Games, 2003) is a PC-based MMORPG released in 2003. The game is based in space, with over 7,000 star systems for the players to navigate through. A subscription to the game is a monthly cost of £9.99 at the time of writing. The breadth of detail within the virtual world is unparalleled, with players actively engaged within an unscripted economy that fluctuates due to occurrences such as warfare and the player-influenced political systems. The scale of ‘warfare’ with the game is unprecedented, with battles recorded as lasting as long as 21 hours (CBS News, 2014). This is where the game mechanics become interesting, however. Such battles have been noted to have caused ‘recessions’ within the virtual world. As resources such as iron must be mined, and if a player’s ship is destroyed within the fighting they must start again, mass battles have caused resource deficits and crashed the economy on occasion. Within the game, players can pick numerous roles and approach. Indeed, the original inspiration for this book was a friend explaining how within the game he acts as a virtual bandit, hacking other player’s ships and demanding resources as ransom. Again, here we see white-collar criminality as being a normalised form of deviancy within video games. However, Eve’s sheer complexity offers some interesting case studies.

Eve Online’s (CCP Games, 2003) currency is known as Interstellar Credits (ISK). As aforementioned, the complex nature of the game, i.e. mining for materials directly affecting the virtual economy is rather unique. Between players, there are around 1.2–1.4 million transactions a day. The complexity is of such a level that in June 2007, Dr Eyjolfur Gudmundsson was hired to be the game’s economist and calculate inflation, create the quarterly economic newsletter and understand the effects of

the in-game play (Hillis, 2007). Gudmundsson has stated that studying the economy of the game allows critical questions of real-world economics to be explored. The white-collar criminality within the game is stark though; banks run by players are commonplace within the virtual world and it is not unheard of for players to 'disappear' with other players' money. As previously mentioned, if a player's ship is destroyed in a battle, they cannot just re-start as in most computer games. The spaceship is lost for good. Due to this a thriving insurance industry run by players has developed. Again, as with the banks, this has created a space for white-collar criminality to thrive. Internet searches found various articles reporting single instances of fraud costing players 850 billion ISK (Geere, 2010). Due to the way in which players can buy membership to the game, via purchasing a month's pass in either virtual (ISK) or actual money, it is possible to equate the theft of such currencies into British sterling, with 850 billion ISK being valued at around £42,000. Within this instance, by the player named 'Bad Bobby', the player proceeded to purchase a 'space craft' that was virtually invincible and put a large bounty on his own account to taunt players (Geere, 2010). It is within instances such as this that the need or conspicuous consumption for one's own validation is highlighted. Other cases, other more abjectly abhorrent approaches to deception are also apparent including a player who, using multiple accounts, orchestrated a complex deception in which she faked suicide with the aim of duping players into donating virtual currency (Messner, 2016).

Such scams, however, are, while morally dubious and increasingly normalised within such gaming communities, contained within the ludodromes. However, examples of such actions influencing the terrestrial are evident including death threats over such disreputable approaches to game play (Drain, 2017). Due to the 'pay-to-play' system, alongside the ability to use real-world currency to purchase virtual items,

the game has displayed the ability for fraudulent behaviour to transgress past the ludodromes and generate real-world income through nefarious means. The most prominent case being that of a player using the pseudonym ‘Richard’ from Australia (King, 2009). Richard reportedly spent over a year working up the ranks of Ebank and gaining the trust of fellow players within the Eve Online (CCP Games, 2003) community. He reports that he received a scam email which offered to buy in-game currency in exchange for actual currency. Struggling with real debt, the 27-year-old tech worker decided to engage in virtual embezzlement. What followed was the player skimming 200 billion ISK from the virtual bank to sell on the ‘black market’. The player profited a total of \$6,300 American dollars which he used to pay for his son’s medical treatment and for a deposit on a family home. For converting the virtual currency into actual currency he received a ban by the creators of the game, whom claimed whilst scams are actively encouraged as a part of the game, selling virtual currency for actual currency is a breach of the rules. When interviewed about his actions, Richard stated:

It was a very on the spot decision...I'm not proud of it at all, that's why I didn't brag about it. But you know, if I had to do it again, I probably would've chosen the same path based on the same situation

(CCP Games, 2003)

Here we can observe what Hall (2015) defines as special liberty alongside the development of deviancy within the ludodromes (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016) transitioning from isolated incidents in which such actions are contained within the virtual realm and offer profitable opportunities in the terrestrial world in legally grey areas. The comments by the player also echo the findings of Tudor (2018) within her work

with those convicted of Fraud. As previously mentioned, the participants of the study rendered harmful outcomes of their actions as secondary.

CONCLUSION

As with various other areas this book has sought to shine a spot light upon, little to no academic work has been conducted in this area. As such this chapter has been reliant upon data garnered from various Internet blogs, bulletin boards and media outlets. Whilst this has been a deficit in terms of the usual approach to academic criminology, it is hoped this chapter offers a starting point for future research. This chapter has sought to highlight that as video games have evolved, increasingly centred around player interaction via the Internet, deviant approaches to generating both virtual and real game currency have become possible. Instances of white-collar criminality are embedded within all levels of the gaming industry to varying degrees at different points historically. It is not proposed that video games will teach individuals how to commit white-collar criminality, but it proposed that, especially within MMORPGs such as EVE Online (CCP Games, 2003) and World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), the virtual space has facilitated the democratization of white-collar criminality, especially fraud. It has opened a space in which individuals can utilise positions of (virtual/pseudo) status to deceive others for their own benefit, often in a manner they could not in the real world but can within the ludodrome. Alongside this, due to the demographics of those whom use such games as a leisure past time, there has been a shift in the demographics of victims. However, just as with traditional forms of white-collar criminality, the legal status of such

actions is blurred. The offences are seldom recognised as a form of criminal transgression even when generating actual (not virtual) income. Both the former prime minister and members of the National Crime Agency have acknowledged such actions as criminal and labelled them a precursor to serious cyber-criminality. The virtual playground of the ludodromes could therefore be perceived as an environment in which cybercriminals may be facilitated to 'hone their craft' in an environment in which such actions are normalised and, dependent on the rules of the game in question, actively encouraged.

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REPRESENTATION OF LGBTQ COMMUNITIES IN THE GRAND THEFT AUTO SERIES

Ben Colliver

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there have been increasing demands for visibility and representation of minority groups within the entertainment industry. This has coincided with a rise in legal and civil protections, and a greater societal awareness of minority groups within the United Kingdom. However, representation and visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities is currently being contested



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within the United Kingdom. Protests across the United Kingdom, but primarily concentrated within Birmingham have focused on censoring LGBT visibility within education (Colliver, 2018). These protests signify a social climate which seeks to roll back equality and diversity initiatives and render minority groups invisible. Although there has been growing levels of visibility of LGBTQ communities within a number of different social spheres, it is important to interrogate the accuracy of the representations and identify harmful stereotypes which are perpetuated through mass media forms. Whilst issues of diversity and equality span a number of different identity characteristics, this chapter will be focusing solely upon issues of gender and sexuality within games.

Undeniably, the gaming industry is hugely popular (Bernal-Merino, 2015) and millions of people engage in gaming on a daily basis (Madigan, 2016). With the rise of the Internet, and the opportunities this opened up for participatory, co-operative online play, gaming is firmly established within society as a key form of entertainment. The motivations for gaming are varied (Kircaburun, Jonason, & Griffiths, 2018). The Grand Theft Auto series is arguably one of the most popular game series of all time, with GTA V (Rockstar Games, 2013) being the most profitable entertainment product, producing more profit than other games, music and film franchises including Star Wars (Batchelor, 2018). GTA V was the third best-selling game in the United Kingdom in 2017, four years after its initial release date (Dring, 2018). This chapter will explore the ways in which LGBTQ communities are represented within the GTA games series and identify some of the key stereotypes that are invoked within gameplay for comedic or satirical effect. This chapter will argue that these stereotypes presented within gameplay are harmful for LGBTQ communities in the 'real world' in which discrimination and violence targeting these communities is a very real, lived issue (Home Office, 2018).

PHOBIAS AND NORMATIVITY

The terms ‘phobia’ and ‘phobic’ are used throughout this chapter in relation to gender and sexual minorities. However, it is acknowledged that these terms are difficult to conceptualise and there is contention within academia as to the accuracy of these terms when describing discrimination and violence targeting LGBTQ communities. The word ‘homophobia’ has largely been replaced by the more accurate term ‘heterosexism’ (Hill, 2016). Similarly, the term ‘cissexism’ may be used instead of ‘transphobia’. The use of the word ‘phobia’ to describe a dislike, intolerance or hatred towards gender and sexual minorities may be misleading, in that it suggests that these feelings are irrational. Instead, it is becoming more widely acknowledged that these feelings of intolerance and dislike may be considered entirely rational based on a social system that privileges heterosexuality and cisgenderism, and these feelings are therefore based in a rational, untreatable system of beliefs. However, the terms ‘phobia’ and ‘phobic’ are used throughout this chapter as they are more socially recognisable terms but are conceptualised as a hostility towards the deviation of gender and sexual norms.

There are a number of institutions and structures within the United Kingdom which privilege and normalise heterosexuality and cisgenderism. Wider government structures, educational establishments and the media industry can all perpetuate inequalities and stereotypes within societies. Through constant reinforcement of the normality of heterosexuality and cisgenderism through wider social structures, individuals negotiate their individual sense of self and identity within a number of hierarchies that relate to gender, sexuality, religion, disability status and race, amongst other things, and this creates social ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ (Perry, 2001).

Wider social structures therefore reinforce notions of heteronormativity, the assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless stated otherwise, and cisnormativity, the assumption that everyone is cisgender unless stated otherwise. The minoritised ‘other’ therefore becomes legitimate targets of ridicule, prejudice and violence, often at the hands of various media forms.

The stereotypical presentations of LGBTQ people within mass media forms, including gaming, may contribute to the social climate within which LGBTQ communities negotiate their identities. It will be argued that living within the confines of a capitalist society encourages profit-making ventures over social responsibility. Therefore, representations of minority groups that perpetuate negative stereotypes about targeted groups may contribute to the climate of fear within which they live. Within the United Kingdom, hate crimes targeting LGBTQ people are rising annually ([Home Office, 2018](#)). A total of 13,289 hate crimes targeting LGBTQ communities were recorded in the year 2017–2018, with 11,638 targeting lesbian, gay and bisexual people and 1,651 incidents targeting transgender people ([Home Office, 2018](#)). However, it must be noted that there are a number of incidents which remain unreported for various reasons including a lack of trust within the police and being unaware they have experienced a hate crime. [METRO Charity \(2014\)](#) found that 73% of their participants agreed that discrimination against LGB people is still a social issue and 90% agreed that discrimination against transgender people is still common in society. Additionally, 74% of their participants had experienced name calling and 45% had experienced harassment or threats and intimidation. It is important to acknowledge these experiences in order to frame this chapter within the social climate of which the video games discussed are played.

LGBTQ REPRESENTATION IN GAMES

Whilst this chapter focuses upon the representation of LGBTQ communities within gaming, it is important to acknowledge that gaming constitutes only a section of the United Kingdom's media and entertainment industry. Therefore, it is important to contextualise the state of the media and entertainment industry more broadly in order to frame the wider structures within which gaming sits. Both news media and entertainment media have an impact upon the discrimination and prejudice that many LGBTQ people face in their daily lives. The media can often perpetuate prejudices and stereotypes about marginalised groups (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018). There is already a well-established body of work that explores the persuasive and influential nature of the media in its broadest sense (Green & Brock, 2000; Igartua, 2010; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). The ways in which LGBTQ people are represented within the media can impact both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ people. For LGBTQ people, media representation can significantly impact upon their mental health and sense of identity (McInroy & Craig, 2017). For non-LGBTQ people, the media can impact their views and opinions of minority groups, therefore impacting the levels of discrimination and prejudice minority communities experience.

It cannot be argued that all games seek to present the same level of 'realism' within gameplay. However, despite what genre a game is, most will feature some level of realism in different aspects that relate to the virtual environment of the game (for example, city environment, war environments), the scope for social interaction (often with non-playable characters) and the narrative within which the game is set (Albrechslund, 2007). Therefore, it is unsurprising to find some variation in sexual and gender diversity within games.

Game developers may then experience pressure to reflect all levels of diversity within society, particularly if the game is based within a ‘real-world’ setting. The ways in which minority groups are represented within games are important. Given what we already know about the role of the media and entertainment industry in influencing public perception, the construction of minorities within gaming is likely to influence gamer’s perceptions of minority groups in the ‘real world’. Much like other forms of entertainment including television and film, a lack of diversity in gaming has been identified as a significant issue (Kafai, Richard, & Tynes, 2016). Similarly, within gaming, when diversity is represented, it is often done in stereotypical, pejorative ways.

However, some games have been applauded for their representation of diverse characters and the ability for players to customise and control the lives of their characters. ‘The Sims’ game franchise has arguably revolutionised gender and sexuality in gaming. Same-sex relationships were a possible feature of the game from the very first instalment released in 2000 (Electronic Arts, 2000). Since the initial release, ‘The Sims’ franchise has continually developed gameplay options for LGBTQ characters and ‘The Sims 4’ (Electronic Arts, 2014) now includes same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption and greater control over gender expression including clothing preference and the ability to become pregnant. Not only are players able to create and customise characters in these ways, the franchise has also included a number of pre-made characters in same-sex relationships. Despite its progressive features, The Sims franchise has received critique in the sense that it subtly and structurally reinforces heteronormativity through the use of ‘maid’ services, particularly in The Sims 2 (Electronic Arts, 2004). When a player hires a maid service in this game, the non-playable maid will always be of the opposite gender to the person who hired the service. In this sense, it has been argued

that heteronormativity is structurally reinforced (Albrechtslund, 2007). Whilst The Sims franchise has been hugely popular and a profitable venture, enabling sexual and gender diversity in a respectful way, not all games seek to achieve the same outcome.

Some game franchises have a record of endorsing and perpetuating harmful, dated stereotypes about LGBTQ people. However, it is noted that the game focused on in this chapter represents a different genre and different target audience to The Sims franchise. Despite the different genre and target audience, the Grand Theft Auto series falls into the trap of relying upon stereotypically homophobic, biphobic and transphobic constructions of LGBTQ communities for comedic and entertainment value. Issues of stereotyping have already been explored in relation to criminal and racial stereotypes, with a particular focus on GTA V (Polasek, 2014), released in 2013. This chapter will now move on to explore issues of LGBTQ representation within the GTA series more in depth.

GRAND THEFT AUTO

Given the very masculine nature of the ‘Grand Theft Auto’ series, characterised by violence and aggression, it may be surprising at the amount of LGBTQ representation within the game. However, the representation of LGBTQ communities is largely negative, drawing upon outdated, harmful and pejorative stereotypes. One of the key stereotypes that are drawn upon throughout the game series is representing gay men as effeminate, or ‘camp’. Within the ‘Grand Theft Auto: IV’ (Rockstar Games, 2008) ludodrome, there are a number of non-playable pedestrian characters who are implied to be gay through the dialogue within the game. The pedestrians are coded to move in a more traditionally ‘feminine’ way and use female voices. Furthermore, players are required to create an online dating profile which also

features a number of LGBTQ people. The profiles that are viewable also feed in to this stereotype of femininity. The dating profile for 'French Tom' lists his likes as 'being fabulous' and 'getting pampered'. The dating profile for 'NoBigWillie' lists his dislikes as 'Bad dress sense. Bad shoes. Stupid hair'. These types of representation of gay men feed into inaccurate stereotypes that all gay men love fashion, musicals and present themselves in more stereotypically feminine ways (Griffo, 2014). In this sense, stereotypes are drawn upon to provide obvious, comedic effects, at the expense of minority groups.

A number of other obvious stereotypes, puns and innuendos are also drawn upon for comedic effect. In 'Grand Theft Auto: III' (Rockstar Games, 2001), there are a number of pedestrians with dialogue associated with them making several references to The Village People.¹ The pedestrians can be heard saying phrases such as 'Call the YMCA', 'Looking good, sweetheart' and 'You can sail the seven seas'. Many of the phrases the pedestrians can be heard saying make direct reference to lyrics from songs released by The Village People. However, some of the dialogue is much more explicitly homophobic. Pedestrians can also be heard saying 'get off the road, pansy'. In this sense, the game series not only draws upon the use of puns and stereotypes for comedic effect, there is also a darker, more explicitly homophobic tone to the game.

Another major theme within the representation of gay men within the game is the sexualisation of homosexuality, reducing a nuanced identity and representing it more simplistically as a sex practice. Historically, gay men have been characterised as promiscuous (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006) and this was

1 The Village people are an American disco group best known for their on-stage costumes, suggestive lyrics and for a number of songs that may now be considered 'gay anthems' including 'Y.M.C.A', 'In the Navy' and 'Macho Man'.

perpetuated socially throughout the 1980s and 1990s during the AIDs epidemic, which was termed ‘the gay plague’ (Streitmatter, 2008). In ‘Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas’ (Rockstar Games, 2004), the San Fierro Police can be heard saying phrases such as ‘when I kick your ass, I’m going to fuck it’, ‘first I’m going to beat you up, and then beat you off’ and ‘I’m going to violate your ass’. Whilst none of the police officers explicitly express their homosexuality, the dialogue is intended to imply that they are. This is implied in the most obvious way through sexual discourse. However, in doing so, gay identities are reduced to a sexual practice, thereby negating LGBTQ people’s existence outside of sex.

Similarly, a number of male characters throughout the video game series are portrayed as being sex workers. In ‘Grand Theft Auto: IV’ (Rockstar Games, 2008), the character ‘French Tom’ is noted as having a criminal record for selling sex. Within the same game, the character ‘Florian Cravic’ is also noted as having a criminal record for selling sex. On the other hand, the character Jeremy St. Ives is noted as having paid for sex. Despite the gender of the people from whom he purchased sex not being mentioned, it is also noted that several references are made throughout the game that imply he is homosexual. As discussed previously, the reliance upon sexual stereotypes of gay men is overly simplistic and reductive of gay identities. This also feeds into dominant stereotypes of gay men’s involvement in sex work. Linked directly to stereotypes that portray gay men as promiscuous, assumptions are often made about gay men’s involvement with sex work, escorting, and this is commonly associated with the transmission of HIV. These tropes are historically grounded within the beliefs of ‘sexual perversion’ associated with homosexuality (Panfil, 2017). The representation of gay men as ‘sexually perverted’ or ‘sexually criminal’ is also apparent in ‘Grand Theft Auto: Vice City’ (Rockstar Games, 2002) in

which two members of the 'White Stallionz Gang', a homosexual gang, threaten to rape two other characters. This dialogue and scene draw upon historic stereotypes of gay men as 'sexual predators' (Knauer, 2016). Representing gay men in this way reinforces negative stereotypes of gay men and also contributes to the dehumanisation of LGBTQ communities.

Features of the game are also more explicitly homophobic. In 'Grand Theft Auto: V' (Rockstar Games, 2013), a video game is featured within radio advertisements named 'Pride not Prejudice' and is described as a first-person shooter game. One advert for the game claims that players can 'save the South against liberals and land prospectors and out homosexuals'. In 'Grand Theft Auto: IV' (Rockstar Games, 2008), the player undertakes a mission to save another character from a homophobe who has been harassing them. Throughout this mission, the dialogue that can be heard includes phrases such as 'What's your problem? Fag lover' and 'Florian, open the door, don't be a fag'. In this sense, a vast amount of homophobic language is present throughout the game. As can be seen, this video game series glamorises violence against and the murder of LGBTQ people for entertainment purposes.

The virtual environments within which the games are set are also constructed to achieve comedic effect at the expense of minority communities. In 'Grand Theft Auto: III' (Rockstar Games, 2001), a shipping company is featured which is notably called 'Fudge Packing Corporation'. In the same game features a radio-controlled car which is named 'RC Bandit'. Both terms are innuendos and puns that relate to historically negative phrases for gay men ('fudge packer' and 'arse bandit'). In 'Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas' (Rockstar Games, 2004), a garden centre named 'Uphill Gardener Centre' is featured in the game, within the Queens district, the district that is noted as the games 'gay neighbourhood'. What can be seen is that the game has a number of features within the

virtual environment, that are not directly characters, that seek to mock and ‘other’ LGBTQ communities.

The Grand Theft Auto series also features a number of transgender characters throughout. Similarly to the representation of gay, lesbian and bisexual characters, the game relies on harmful stereotypes for ‘entertainment’ value. The first notable transgender character features in ‘Grand Theft Auto: Vice City’ (Rockstar Games, 2002) and is named ‘The Psycho’. The storyline features ‘The Psycho’ being depicted as obsessed with the games feature band ‘Love Fist’. It is not made apparent whether the character is actually transgender and presents as female at all times, but the mission makes it clear to the player that ‘The Psycho’ presents as female in order to gain access to band members. The player receives a mission to ‘protect’ the band from ‘The Psycho’ by killing her. A number of negative stereotypes are drawn upon in the creation of this character. The most striking stereotype is apparent in the character’s name. Transgender people are routinely constructed as ‘mentally ill’ (Colliver, Coyle, & Silvestri, 2019). Arguably, this has been influenced by medical professions and the appearance of ‘gender dysphoria’ in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The representation of transgender people as ‘mentally ill’ reinforces a social hierarchy that constructs transgender people as ‘less than’ and legitimates discrimination against transgender communities.

The narrative surrounding ‘The Psycho’ also implies that she presents as female in order to ‘deceive’ the band mates in order to gain access to them. In this sense, the transgender character is presented as being sexually deviant and deceptive. Again, this is a harmful stereotype of transgender women, and deception ‘has been perhaps the most historically consistent and successful idiom through which transgender rights are abrogated and transgender lives are pathologized,

demeaned, or cut short' (Fischel, 2019, p. 99). This is a particularly harmful stereotype to perpetuate as it is often drawn upon to justify violence against transgender people, particularly transgender women. In a study of over 7,000 news stories that focused on the murders of transgender and gender non-conforming people over a 15-year period, ending in 2005, it was found that the dominant media frame 'described the violence as a response to actual or perceived deception of the perpetrator by the transgender person' (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, pp. 445–46). The sexualisation of transgender women is a recurrent theme throughout the game series.

Transgender characters also appear in 'Grand Theft Auto: V' (Rockstar Games, 2013). The most visible transgender people in this segment of the series are sex workers, who can be found in groups, primarily outside of the purchasable gay bar within the game. Both the visual and narrative are designed to imply these sex workers are transgender. They are depicted with primarily muscular bodies, broad shoulders and facial features that are primarily associated with masculinity. The dialogue within the game is also designed to imply that these characters are transgender. As a player, upon approaching a group of transgender sex workers, one of the potential dialogues that can be heard is 'Hello, sir. I mean, madam. I mean, whatever'. The dialogue is constructed to present the characters as gender non-conforming, causing apparent confusion within the playable character. The sexualisation of transgender people is also apparent within the character 'Peach' who can be found working within a chain of strip clubs. The character was voiced by a male actor, and this is intended to reinforce her transgender identity. She is also the only employee of the strip club who cannot be taken home by the playable character.

This is interesting, as transgender women are presented as both sexual objects within the game, but also as an

undesirable sexual partner for men. As has been noted by other scholars (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017), various research has explored the fear of fetishization transgender people may experience and the impact this has on their confidence in pursuing romantic and/or sexual relationships. Whilst many transgender people engage in work in the sex industry, because of many prejudices that transgender women face, in some spaces, sex work is the only profession open to transgender women (Ditmore, 2006). However, the representation of transgender characters in this series does not reflect the complex, nuanced structures that often regulate transgender people's lives. Instead, easily-identifiable, harmful stereotypes are reproduced within the game series that reinforces and perpetuates the fetishization of transgender women.

The final notable transgender character within the series features in 'Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories' (Rockstar Games, 2006). The character of Reni is also sexualised, as it becomes apparent that although now working in the film industry, her previous career highlights include sex work and pornography. However, as this chapter has already discussed the sexualisation of transgender women within the series, it is key to also consider other ways in which transgender women are presented throughout. One of the missions titled 'So Long Schlong' that the playable character must complete in this game requires them to enable Reni to undergo gender reassignment surgery for the fourth time. Whilst additional dialogue within the game may lead to the understanding that Reni is non-binary, the inclusion of multiple surgeries seeks to reinforce the idea that transgender people are confused, unstable and cannot make up their minds (Colliver et al., 2019). This is another harmful stereotype that is often drawn upon in order to deny transgender people access to medical interventions.

It is not only characters within the game series that reinforce negative stereotypes. The virtual environment within which the game is located is constructed in a way that mocks transgender people. The visual construction of these ‘jokes’ primarily relates to gender reassignment surgery. In ‘Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas’ (Rockstar Games, 2004), a car customisation garage is featured in the game called ‘Trans-Fender’ and features the tag line ‘Body Swap Shop’. Both the name and tag line are constructed to be word-play around gender reassignment and reinforces the socially recognisable understanding of transgender people as ‘swapping’ their bodies. A similar theme also features in ‘Grand Theft Auto: IV’ (Rockstar Games, 2008) in which the in-game postal service is named ‘Post Op’ and the tag line for the service is ‘No Longer Just Mail’. Both are obvious references to gender reassignment surgery. Whilst these may not appear to be explicitly transphobic, they seek to minimise the issue of gender reassignment surgery, capitalising on its perceived ‘comedic’ value at the expense of transgender communities.

CONCLUSION

What becomes clear throughout this chapter is that the Grand Theft Auto series relies on harmful stereotypes relating to LGBTQ populations for comedic, satirical and entertainment value. This, in turn, contributes and perpetuates a culture of ‘othering’ and segregating those deemed ‘different’ from society’s heteronormative, cisnormative assumptions. As has been demonstrated by other game franchises such as The Sims, it is possible to positively represent LGBTQ communities whilst maintaining a profitable, yet socially responsible game series. The level of anti-LGBTQ content within the game series varies from homoerotic undertones to explicitly and openly

homophobic language. It is widely acknowledged that stereotypes can be harmful for minority communities (Beasley & Fischer, 2012; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). Stereotypes can be harmful in the sense that they can promote exclusion, discrimination and prejudice at a more individual level, even when perpetuated at a wider, societal level. What becomes clear throughout this chapter is that the impact of living in a capitalist society that privileges profit over social responsibility leads to gender and sexual minorities being presented within video games based on harmful stereotypes that perpetuate harms against minority communities in the real world.

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THE NORMALISATION OF SEXUAL DEVIANCE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN VIDEO GAMES

Kevin Hoffin and Geraldine Lee-Treweek

INTRODUCTION

Elias and Dunning speak of the need to re-channel the more aggressive elements of overt sexuality through the media, books, sport, etc., in order to promote ‘civility’ (Elias & Dunning, 1993); they argue that this allows for the dualist nature of libidinal or taboo desires to co-exist with civil society, without the contravention of either. Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) apply this ‘civilising process’ theory to video games,



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arguing that, while media technologies can be used to create image-spaces where personal experimentation with such libidinal desires can take place, a deeper criminological understanding of virtual harms in these spaces is a necessity. Without the acknowledgement of new harms, these spaces become unchecked realms, which enable the further denial and neutralisation of damage inflicted on citizens with these virtual spaces (ludodromes). This chapter explores the relationship between representations of sexual violence in video games and normalisation. In doing so, it provides a cultural and feminist approach to the issues, delineating key debates whilst embedding cutting-edge examples of new media as well as notable examples from the history of the medium into the discussion.

Deviance in gaming requires analysis and interpretations framed in theoretical ways that permit new understandings to emerge. There has been a tendency for single voices to dominate in discussions of cultural forms in which violence takes place or is depicted. This chapter will use diverse voices and perspectives to demonstrate the need for innovative, collaborative scholarship, to enable new directions and new analyses to emerge on how depictions of sexual violence/deviance in gaming have advanced and to what end.

FEMINIST AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO GAMING

This chapter brings together two authors, a cultural criminologist and a feminist sociologist, to analyse gaming and sexual violence within this cultural form. We argue that critical, inclusionary and feminist approaches are crucial to moving debates on gaming forward and examining how criminology can play a role in understanding virtual harms. In particular, our concerns with power are not so far apart,

cultural criminology having been influenced strongly by various feminist debates and feminism being a broad philosophy and practice, with a core interest in power inequalities. Cultural criminology is fundamentally concerned with the same, specifically power in the construction of crime and deviance and positions cultural dynamics as the vehicles of the meaning of crime. In doing so, it seeks to identify, map and analyse ways in which cultural forces interconnect and liaise with the practices of crime and deviance in their broadest sense, including the transgressive, or yet to be, crime.

The field of philosophy, thinking and practice of feminism is broad, within it there are dedicated gamers, people in tech (people is used here to indicate that men too, can be feminists) and those who are directly opposed to all forms of culture where women are represented in unequal ways. Gaming is a challenge for feminism because game designers often utilise violence as one of the core means of character interaction. Therefore, given evidenced societal patterns of violence, is it unsurprising, that violence against women should become prevalent within virtual worlds; worlds created by real people, socialised in societies in which abuse (and abuse against women and children, in particular) are commonplace. That is not to say that gamers necessarily agree with sexual abuse in gaming, but the conditions under which the industry and cultural form operates, mean they cannot detach from it easily. Sexual abuse is part of the general landscape of gaming in tropes and narratives of violence against women, girls and low-powered groups, meaning that choosing to avoid this becomes difficult, if not albeit impossible within certain genres. Similar to [Dines' \(2010\)](#) account of 'pornified society', the cultural form of gaming is stretching the boundaries of social norms around abuse of women, children and other vulnerable groups. Dines positions pornography as a central tenet of

contemporary patriarchal society but explains that violence against women benefits neither women nor men, as it denigrates both, damages relationships and role models sexual behaviour towards a format based on violence and abuse. She also links the existence of pornography, and particularly the increasingly extreme nature of acts within it, to increasing abuse of women and girls. The cause-and-effect relationship is hotly debated, but radical feminists tend to position this as an aspect of a wider landscape of abuse against women, a landscape that we conceptualise here as including misogynistic violence and abuse towards female characters within videogames.

The emergence of notions of ‘toxic masculinity’, as a bundle of negatives around the socialisation and lived experience of men (Ging, 2017), has also taken centre stage in feminist and also cultural criminological accounts, with gaming included. For instance, sociologist Kimmel (2008) examines masculinity in the United States, focusing on the impact of male culture socialisation on young men. He represents the transition into adulthood for men as a perilous and confusing time that sets them up with norms of video game use, porn, alcohol abuse and short-term sexual conquests. Tying video game use into a cultural recipe for male transition seems to present gaming as part of a negative culture. This is perhaps why there is often antagonism between gamers and feminists, because gamers find their leisure, packaged up with negative features of contemporary life, with no notion of gaming having the potential of being positive. Whilst undoubtedly, there are problems with gaming currently, which relate to issues around the depiction of women characters, the inclusion of sexual violence specifically geared towards women characters and used as a means of interaction, nonetheless, the potential for change is real.

Feminist gamers argue that gaming can be redeemed from the current industry-push towards abuse of vulnerable

and low-power groups. Anita Sarkeesian, whose feminist website about gaming has strongly influenced debates (see www.feministfrequency.com), has made public that she does not see gaming as leading to abuse of women, instead gaming is part of a wider milieu of abuse against women, which needs urgent redress:

When I say that media matters and has an influence on our lives, I'm not saying it's a 1:1 correlation or a monkey-see, monkey-do situation ... but rather that media's influence is subtle and helps to shape our attitudes, beliefs and values for better and for worse. Media can inspire greatness and challenge the status quo or sadly, more often, it can demoralize and reinforce systems of power and privilege and oppression.

(cited in [Totilo, 2015](#), online)

Sarkeesian is a self-confessed gaming fan, with a mission to reshape the industry and excise negative tropes, such as sexist depictions of women and reinforcement of misogynistic culture. Other feminist concerns include the way females are characterised (particularly the lack of diversity of activity, dress and body shape), the focus on hyper-sexualised characters, the lack of credible roles for female characters and the buying and selling of women or use of them as trophies and rewards (particularly as sexual rewards). However, these are not only the concerns of self-identified feminists. Many of these critiques are shared across scholarly perspectives concerned with inclusion, inequalities and representations and, therefore, facilitate potential for collaboration and new perspectives emerging.

In bringing our cultural criminology and feminist sociological approaches together, the authors argue that gaming can be seen to have various central tropes that are highly problematic in relation to denigrating women, girls and other

excluded or lower power groups in modern societies. Moreover, these same repetitive narratives often promote/reinforce sexist attitudes, rape myths and normalisation of abuse. However, we concur with Sarkeesian that the possibilities are there for gaming to be empowering and positive, if issues of power, privilege and sexual violence are taken seriously within the gaming industry. This chapter now turns to examining key narratives/tropes in games and sexual violence.

'FRIDGING THE GIRLFRIEND', GOD OF WAR AND TOMB RAIDER

This is a trope identified by comic book/graphic novel writer Gail Simone, and originally reported through her website ([Women in Refrigerators, 1999](#)), which represents the trend by media creators to kill, rape, depower or otherwise abuse female characters in order to motivate the male protagonist into action. The name derives from a 1994 Green Lantern comic in which Kyle Rayner (Green Lantern) finds his girlfriend, Alexandra Dewitt, killed and forced into a refrigerator ([Marz, Banks, Tanghal, & Mattsson, 1994](#)). This ultimate objectification, completely denies the individual character of the victim, dehumanising her and reducing her to little more than a stimulant. The needlessly violent deaths experienced by such women often stretch to ridiculous levels of depravity. It's not enough to kill a woman; she must be humiliated, even in death, in order to propagate the correct response in the hero. Her experience becomes secondary to that of the hero. The depravity reaches an extreme in order to provoke reaction, and this paradigm excuses the hero's escalating responses when it comes to facing the antagonist. The irony is not lost here that Alexandra Dewitt is found forcibly stored in the same way as a literal 'piece of meat'. The act instils the idea of a 'protector' persona in the protagonist, by brutally attacking someone the hero is close to,

or merely to push the story arc further. There are numerous examples of this across all forms of media.

Video games are no exception, female characters who fall victim to this trope become little more than a tool for male agency and violence towards them a vehicle for his story. In the original 'God of War' (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005), the antagonist, Ares, tricks the protagonist, Kratos, into violently killing his wife and daughter during an attack on a village, waging war at Ares' behest. This event spurs our now ashen white hero into seeking revenge against Ares. The urge to avenge the deaths of the innocents lies behind this relentless, maddening fury for retribution. The accidental deaths of Kratos' family creates a technique of neutralisation, a denial of responsibility, that exonerates Kratos in the eyes of the narrative (Sykes & Matza, 1957), with Kratos' tale acting more as that of a revenge fantasy over any degree of moral redemption. The idea of being crazed with revenge further obligates the male character to operate outside of their sensibilities, robbing them of their responsibility, placing them as (secondary) victims, obscuring the victimhood of the woman as lesser. The victim narrative for the hero is easily escapable, as it is quickly subverted into violent, bloodthirsty revenge. In this narrative, the violence against the family is a backdrop to the foregrounded male journey to further violence.

The popular reboot of the Tomb Raider franchise (2013) created a similar issue. Ron Rosenberg, an executive at the developers provoked controversy when early on in the games' development, he offered footage of the heroine, Lara Croft, surrounded by indigenous characters and contextualised it casually as, 'enemies will try to rape her' (Fogg, 2018). He declared that the sexual assault was important in Lara's character development and that players would want to protect her (Matulef, 2012; Reynolds, 2012). The player wants to guide and drive Lara to safety; helping her whenever possible,

moulding her from the weak, 'damsel in distress' into the sexy, strong (hyper-sexualised) warrior that we recognise as Lara Croft from the first generation of Tomb Raider games. This comment was later retracted by the developers at Crystal Dynamics as being an instance of 'miss-speaking' (Fogg, 2018), and that the contentious scene depicted 'close physical intimidation' (Matulef, 2012). The casual manner with which Rosenberg made this announcement reveals a normalised attitude to the concept of sexual violence and a troublingly cavalier approach to sexual violence, communicated without thought for potential ramifications.

In the reboot (2013), Lara is not the hardened Tomb Raider that she undoubtedly becomes, but a young woman trapped on an island. The developers were trying to give a background to the character, which before was notably absent. However, there is an underlying implication that Croft needed to be broken down to her core through tragedy, before adopting the heroic and 'masculine' mindset now familiar. A common trope of heroes is overcoming adversity/tragedy, for example, Batman and Iron Man. But in Lara's case, unlike these male characters, the threat or portrayal of sexual violence is deployed to enable this transformation, Hamilton (2012) argues, to show that women can become heroes and that the male characters are evil. It can be seen that in the transformative tragedies experienced by heroes, males lose others (friends and loved ones), whereas female heroes are victimised. It is worth noting that Lara Croft endures multiple tragedies throughout her 'tomb raiding' career, but continues without wavering. The developers appear to be commenting that sexual assault changes a woman permanently, thus a priori that the ultimate power still remains with males, being the one who can rape, threaten rape and therefore transform female characters. Moreover, the notion that rape or sexual assault is some kind of positive transformative

awakening, bringing out the hero in Lara, is highly problematic in terms of ignoring the diverse experiences for real-world survivors of attempted or achieved rape.

Sexual violence, as portrayed in modern video games, most often appears as a narrative device, not an active role that the player must navigate or take part in. This pattern is also cognisant of sexual assault in films, such as the *Taken* and *Death Wish* franchises, where rape and sexual assault are ultimately seen as wrongs done to the loved ones of the protagonists, to provoke revenge. In these accounts, the female characters who experience abuse are backdrops to the motivations of men and move the story towards the ‘understandable’ violence response of males. This trope dismisses abuse towards women, subjugating it to the ‘more important’ male storyline, which in terms of reinforcing notions of women as ‘natural’ victims is unhelpful. However, there are examples where the player does engage in sexual abuse within the ludodrome (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016), some of which are discussed below.

SEXUAL DEVIANCE AND THE RISE OF ‘EROGE’

The first recognised ‘erotic’ video game, ‘Night Life’ (Koei, 1982a) was sold as a sexual aid for couples, featuring images of suggestions for different sexual positions and a schedule so that partners could identify when menstruation would occur. Night Life was a precursor to the ‘eroge’ genre (a portmanteau of erotic and game) which was quickly followed by the role-playing game ‘Seduction of the Condominium Wife’ (Koei, 1982b) which sealed the makers, the Japanese company Koei, as a powerful software developer.

A famous western proponent of this trend was ‘Custer’s Revenge’ (Mystique, 1982a) for the Atari 2600. In this game, the player’s avatar based upon General Custer, stood naked in

a Stetson-style hat with a comically erect penis, on the far left of the screen. The objective was to avoid arrows while traversing towards the right-hand corner where an Indigenous American female character, with equally comical breasts, was tied to a pole, immediately appropriating elements of sexual exploitation and overt racism. Upon successful completion of the level, Custer would reach the woman with the perceived intention of raping her. The simulated act of rape fulfilled the role of a reward for players who managed to avoid the onslaught of arrows. The title itself frames the dominance of the male, the invasion by Custer of the Indigenous American female character and sexual violation becomes 'revenge', mercilessly committed against a perceived weaker, subjugated innocent. The Indigenous American woman's violation was only presented to those who could successfully complete the levels, representing the wider Western cinematic and literature trope that by beating adversity, there is an expectation of entitlement. The 'champion' would 'get the girl', displaying a sense of entitlement among players that would be familiar from media representations of relationships, and cultural norms that promote goals of sexual conquests in response to overcoming problems.

The developers released two other games for the Atari 2600, 'Beat 'em & Eat 'em' and 'Bachelor Party' (both [Mystique, 1982b, 1982c](#)), featuring heavily sexual themes. All were received negatively, and Mystique collapsed as a company, whereas, their Japanese counterparts were steadily growing. The Japanese games were well received in their home market and the United States' offerings sank their parent company and erotic gaming in the United States in general. The games from Koei were built around sex; their eroticism was a necessary component of the game. Mystique's products were sexualised versions of fairly rudimentary games. 'Beat 'em & Eat 'em' was essentially the 1978 game 'Avalanche'

where players caught falling rocks. 'Beat 'em' turned this into a masturbating man at the top of the screen dropping semen onto the players, masquerading as naked women. The avatars are tasked with catching the secretion in their mouths; letting it hit the ground too many times results in the player losing. Bachelor Party was 'Pong' (1972) with extraneous genitals to present a naked man with, once again, a comically erect penis (the ball) being bounced towards naked women, with comical breasts (the blocks). This could explain the demise of *Mystique* in that their output consisted of re-treads of games that had existed for close to 10 years (in *Pong*'s case) as opposed to new material, using eroticism and therefore deviance as a superfluous gimmick. In both cases, the pornographic elements of the game centralise male desire and phallus-centricity. The games continue the common critique of porn that it exists as solely respite for the male gaze, and the women are just passive in sexual activity (Dines, 2010). However, gender-swapped versions of the games exist, simply with the roles reversed. In the gender-swapped 'Philly Flasher' (1982d), male avatars catch falling lactate from a woman. However, the gender-swap version cannot be said to subvert the pornographic element to the desires of women – lactation and cumming are hardly the same.

NIGHT TRAP

Sega's 'Night Trap' (Sega, 1992) featured heavily in the 1994 US Senate Committee hearing on violence in video games, due to its content. The game itself runs on an interactive movie-style basis. The player is tasked with watching security cameras to protect a group of teenage girls having a slumber party in a mysterious house. As the player watches the footage, vampires are constantly trying to attack and drag away the girls; your

objective is to spring traps located around the house to prevent this from happening (Donovan, 2010, p. 228). One immediately sees a commonality with the other games featured in this chapter, that the male gaze is highly active (ironically, voyeurism is vital to beating the game), as the women are passive recipients of violence and heroism. The lack of sentience displayed by the girls in the game speaks volumes about their role as damsels in distress, and with very little accountability or responsibility to alter their fate. Along with *Mortal Kombat* (1992), *Night Trap* was a subject of US Democratic Party Senators Joseph Lieberman and Herb Kohl's 1993–1994 Senate hearing committee. While the footage is relatively tame, it was the centre of a row over whether it promoted violence against women. However, besides the obvious voyeuristic implications of the gameplay, the aim of the game was to prevent sexual violence, those scenes would only trigger upon the player's failure. However, Lieberman completely misunderstood this concept, seeing it as a game which rewarded players with the footage for violent acts (Donovan, 2010, p. 228). The footage that was alluded to by the Senate, that gratuitous, gory violence could be meted out on women at the player's hands, simply did not exist in the game; Lieberman called the game 'sick' and 'disgusting' (Ponder, 2017). Ironically, in anticipation of backlash due to its content, the game's director, James Riley, explained that the violence was significantly toned down, as contributing party Hasbro (who were responsible for *Night Trap*'s intended home console) were marketing towards children and were concerned about 'reproducible violence' (Ponder, 2017). The 'Vampires' were made toothless and comedic; needing tools to drill into their victims' necks to procure blood and called 'Augers' (Ponder, 2017). The satire and parodic aspect of the game, a response to the 1980s' trend for 'vampire melodramas', was completely lost on Lieberman's Committee (Ponder, 2017).

GRAND THEFT AUTO AND VICTIMISATION OF
SEX WORKERS

In 'Grand Theft Auto' ([Take Two, 1997](#); [Rockstar Games, 2013](#) for latest iteration), a low-key feature of the experience is the ability to 'pick up' prostitutes in your vehicle and drive to a secluded area to partake in a coital transaction. This act will increase the player's health in exchange for a sum of currency. After the transaction has taken place, the prostitute will leave the player's car and walk away. It is possible to then kill the prostitute and reclaim one's money. This element of sexual violence stands apart from similar examples for two reasons. Primarily, it is not a principle feature of the game; the game world features numerous health pickups that are a far more convenient method of regaining HP than investing the time and money in finding a sex worker and driving somewhere quiet in order to begin the activity. Secondly, killing the prostitute to regain the money is an unfortunate plication of two parts of the game's mechanics. It is possible throughout the entirety of the game to kill bystanders and steal their money, with the only dis-incentive being that of the possibility of a raised 'wanted' level. The act of using a sex worker and killing her is an element of the game that has caused notable outrage in the media; most likely due to the sexual element, as the level of violence across the whole game is fairly consistent. The normalisation of sexual violence typified here is focussed on the player's exploitation of it; as it is entirely avoidable and not the decision of the game developers. Grand Theft Auto as a series is known for its satirical outlook (as discussed in earlier Chapter 3), the risky behaviour exhibited by sex workers in game (leaving the player's vehicle and walking away with disregard for their location or safety) could be interpreted as a comment on the eternal victimisation of sex workers, as ever-present victims and particularly vulnerability

to exploitation, abuse or murder. If players choose to utilise in-game sex workers in this way, the dynamic of using the sex worker for the purpose of regaining HP, then killing her to get back the money exchanged, can be read as a commentary on the 'disposable' attitudes that gamers have towards sex workers and which is left down to the individual player choice and their moral decisions. Also, of interest is that if a player wants to be particularly bloodthirsty and procure money through wanton murder, it is far more convenient to murder more affluent women avatars, who can be found in business areas and suburbs of the ludodrome. This would mean a speedier attainment of capital; however, this would be more likely to result in a raised wanted level, as it would involve appearing in public. Here the utilisation of inequalities as features of the game, and positioned as gamer choice, is visible. It is clear that gaming can reinforce inequalities, as well as negative social attitudes about prostitution/sex work and the disposability of women.

The models of the sex workers themselves are all based on dangerous clichés and stereotypes. All are female and overtly eager to 'do business' – robbing them of any agency, constructive back stories, or important engagement with the narrative. This singular vision of sex workers creates a disingenuous space, which is solely filled by the 'happy' sex worker – hardly reflective of the real. They are young, pretty and completely separate from the structural inequalities pushing women towards the role. Prostitutes in *Grand Theft Auto* are prostitutes, just because. They represent little more than the tools of male fantasy (Dines, 2010). In a game series that strives to flesh out its side characters as much as possible, the limited options available to the sex worker avatars (limited appearances, dialogue, engagement, etc.) appear problematic. This can, if left unchecked, contribute to the socially constructed gonzo porn-esque 'rape culture'

(Dines, 2010, pp. 62–63, 87) idea about real-life sex workers and women in general. In *GTA V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), one of the avatars, Michael, has a daughter who is edging towards the world of softcore pornography quite eagerly, much to her father's chagrin. A few missions involve actively disrupting this lifestyle and violently responding to those that are out to exploit the young woman. This is in stark contrast to the prostitutes and strip clubs that he frequents. Michael embodies a culture that Dines speaks of, where women whom men profess to love (wives, mothers and daughters) are seen as in a radically different light, by these same men, to adult performers/sex workers (Dines, 2010). Somehow, it is easier to lose empathy for the women in sex work, thus making it easier and guilt-free to exploit them, denying their victimhood (Sykes & Matza, 1957). The game itself makes this hypocrisy clear and is providing a commentary on a hypersexualised 'rich-bitch' stereotype, that sees herself as sexually empowered, rebelling against her hyper-masculine father, who believes that she is 'too good' for that lifestyle. However, it is acceptable for him to exploit other women, as it is symbolic of his macho image. The exchange of women in this way makes them totems for masculine power (Dworkin, 1984). The game encourages players to think like Michael and completing missions depends on the player carrying out Michael's wishes, thus as in many other examples, normalising the behaviour. The themes of entitlement, deception and buying women to fulfil one's pleasure mimic the worst of neo-liberal male sexual consumer culture in the real world.

A video montage comprising of scenes from *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games, 2008) produced by gaming industry news company IGN entitled 'Ladies of Liberty City: Very Bad Things' consisted of an array of footage from the game featuring the women from the game in situations ranging from titillation to violence, including a scene where

the protagonist, Niko, violently shoots a prostitute he has just paid for sex with. The company has since withdrawn the video from its domains and apologised that it ‘crossed a line’ (Totilo, 2008). This was not before sociologists jumped on the violent, pornographic nature of the video, misrepresenting it to align with their agendas, or possibly, misunderstanding the purpose of the piece (an unofficial montage, not a trailer representing the game) (Ezell, 2009; Dines, 2010, p. 62). Dines uses Ezell’s graphic description of the content two years after the video was withdrawn without mentioning the video’s origins and scant association with the game or developers; thus, problematically generalising the game based on minutes of footage specifically selected by a third party. This in turn legitimises the negativity surrounding gaming, as comments are made by those whose objectivity is woefully affected by their bias, in Dines’ case, her anti-pornography stance. This may go as far as undermining the value of legitimate critique of the game, as it places the very real possibility that other critiques are coloured by a subjective bias and a result of a moral panic, which is not the case.

RAPE AND EXTREME VIOLENCE IN THE LUDODROME

The relatively recent creation of the most extreme examples of gaming, which position sexual violence as explicit to players’ aims, provide illustrations of the extent to which the male lens of video games is prepared to go to meet consumer demand. In this extreme category, and bearing in mind that violence against women is already visible in readily available games, as described above, include *Night Trap* (Digital Pictures, includes themes of child abuse and sexual violence); *RapeLay* (Illusion Soft, 2006, which involves the gamer

taking on a role of a stalker with the aim of raping a mother and daughters); the Gal*Gun Series (Inti Creates, 2011, which allows players to sexual abuse of underage characters) and Rape Day (Desk Plant, 2019, which includes scenes of a baby being killed, necrophilia, rape and murder). As can be seen, these games directly focus on some of the most challenging issues for anti-gender-based violence professionals, law enforcement and criminal justice systems today including stalking, incest, rape and child abuse. These are serious, real experiences that countless people survive and then have to live with, in terms of trauma, mental well-being issues and physical damage (Bourke, 2012; Chivers-Wilson, 2006). The gaze of such extreme video games is not hindered by consequence or impact or lived experience; these, however, are the concerns of survivors, professionals in the field and feminists (Dines, 2010).

Rape Day (although admittedly difficult to access and play for most gamers) illustrates the extent to which sexual violence is seen by some game creators, as an acceptable feature of the ludodrome. It also demonstrates the consequences of having no boundaries in a self-regulated neo-liberal industry. The developer, Desk Plant, markets the game on its website as a ‘dark comedy with pornographic elements ... [a] visual novel where you control the choices of a terrifying psychopath during a zombie apocalypse’ (Rogers, 2019). Comedy and satire, as noted above, is commonly used as a trope to explain aspects of abuse in games, but it is interesting to ponder whom the comedy serves. Desk Plant promotes the game by saying, ‘You can verbally harass, kill people and *rape* women as you choose to progress the story’ (Rogers, 2019). This is a game explicitly focused on using rape as a key goal. It goes without saying that whilst many mainstream games reinforce gender stereotypes and power relationships, by positing women as available and

expendable sexual entities for forced sexual use, Rape Day female characters' main purpose is to be raped and/or murdered. Rape Day and similar games promote acceptance of rape myths, reinforcement of misogyny and enable a sense of sexual aggression (Guggisberg, 2019). In March 2019, it was reported that the Steam Store would not be distributing Rape Day. The Valve Corporation, who are the American video game developer and digital distribution company who own Steam Store, stated that, 'after significant fact-finding and discussion, we think "Rape Day" poses unknown costs and risks and therefore won't be on Steam' (Statement from Erik Johnson, Valve Executive, 2019, cited in Balana, 2019). Whilst one can stand behind Valve's decision, it is the case that the platform hosts numerous other titles that involve female characters being abused. One wonders what the risks and costs are and whether it is actually the breadth of negative notoriety of the game, rather than the content per se, that led to Valve's aversion to distribution. The fact remains that there is a heritage in gaming of using sexual violence as a means to sales.

CONCLUSIONS AND WHERE NEXT FOR THE STUDY OF VIOLENCE IN VIDEO GAMES?

This chapter has outlined conventional and feminist debates and concerns around sexual violence in gaming. It is clear that many concerns of feminists have resonance in other non-feminist arenas that also have apprehensions around gaming and equality, ethics and wider impacts on society. Gaming advances in 30 years have run concurrent to societal advances in the area of anti-racist and anti-sexist representations in TV media, for instance. However, gaming has stayed stunningly resistant, indeed arguably going in the opposite direction to

such media changes. However, after the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements, there is a greater societal critical engagement, and video games can no longer sit outside this analytical and change-oriented gaze. Instances of gamer and industry resistance can be seen recently. For example, the Gamergate movement resisted this level of analysis, when they were invited to share their space with women and female gamers who consciously and very visibly entered the gaming arena. The (male) gaming protestors would routinely state that gaming was their world (an illustration of entitlement), and that feminists had ‘ruined’ everything else, and wanted to do the same to video games. They displayed violent misogynistic views and caused trouble for the growing number of female gamers, particularly those that wanted to reduce toxic elements of masculinity in gaming. Developers were encouraged to cater to this market, by taking greater care in representations of women, although games, like Grand Theft Auto, would deploy a camouflage of a hyper-masculine satirical context to partially avoid such recriminations. Gaming, therefore, seems to fight back when held to account for sexist and misogynistic games and attitudes, with the emergence of games, such as Rape Day, illustrating the interest of game designers in creating highly violent content, with little concern for impact, ethics or real-world survivors.

When discussing sexual deviance and violence in the ludodrome, it is important to acknowledge that such portrayals will contribute to the socially constructed world of the player. These virtual harms interconnect with and imprint on life in the real. Whilst there have been movements to equalise gaming, there is a long way to go in creating equal opportunity and diversity-aware gaming, the integration of acceptable treatment of women characters and positive response to critiques of social economic power and inequalities. For instance, are the millions of victims/survivors of violence and sexual

abuse to be excluded from gaming? It seems there is no place for them as consumers, unless they accept the status quo and representations of violent abuse. The existence of rape as a cultural form of entertainment affects the multitude of people (and here we can cite men, women and children) who are victims of sexual assault in the real world, who live with all that brings. The games industry shows little concern about including gender-based violence and rape and those potential consumers. In a world of 'trigger warnings' and, increasingly, care taken to ensure that trauma of abuse survivors is respected, the gaming industry has remained relatively free of any responsibility. Criminological study would do well to study these potential audiences, if/how they negotiate a virtual world that is out of synch with cultural changes in the real world around equality.

Likewise, the study of gamers who continue to play, despite finding extreme violent aspects of games unacceptable, is crucial. If one is to understand misogyny in gaming, there has to be space to hear and analyse voices that do not banally accept dominant discourse. As noted in the introduction, choice is an odd concept in gaming; to play you often have to interact with all kinds of activities. Understanding how some people negotiate around aspects of games and the culture generally, which they do not relate to and reject is crucial. There is a need to examine masculinity as a set of cultural repertoires that men and boys interact with in complex ways, that is to say to step away from a coverall notion of 'toxic masculinity' and study points at which people are able to step away from it and how/why they do this. A criminological and feminist collaborative approach might fruitfully examine the exceptions to better understand the normalisation of violent abuse and sexual violence towards women in gaming – such examinations and the need change in videogames are urgent.

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'GAMING THE SYSTEM?' THE
MERITS, MYTHS AND REALITIES IN
UNDERSTANDING PRISON
ARCHITECT: SECURITY,
REHABILITATION AND VIOLENCE
AS REPRESENTED IN THE
WORLD'S BESTSELLING
CARCERAL VIDEO GAME

James Treadwell

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore how a prison-themed video game may have come to shape some understandings of the nature, character and function of the carceral realm. It



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considers the case of the leading prison simulation game, *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019), and considers how that game's portrayal of prison, specifically both its function and management, polarises and contrasts between themes of punishment and rehabilitation, in turn reflecting what are often broader societal debates about incarceration. The primary intent and purpose of this piece then is to consider how this extant prison-themed video game reflects dominant (and often quite binary) norms and ideas concerning imprisonments competing function (juxtaposing security and rehabilitation as binaries that can never be fully reconciled). However, having considered this aspect of the prison video game, the chapter broadens its focus to consider how 'gaming' in prison aptly illustrates these tensions in praxis. It considers the importance of the tension between security and rehabilitation as an unsolvable reality at the centre of western, late modern, neoliberal and post-industrial mass imprisonment, specifically in the US and England and Wales. In such countries as the United States and the United Kingdom alike, the playful premise of *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019) profitable incarceration is enacted every day in the stark realities of prison warehousing, which are far from a game, for the real players has seemingly become the dominant and unquestioned solution to the crime problem. Furthermore, it considers how in reality, a security dominant ideology limits the ability to conceive of the role of digital technologies within the prison system in any manner other than to see them as threat, and hence fails to recognise the potential rehabilitative potential of the digital and games. Overall, this chapter aims to provide a new consideration of digital games as their relation to prison settings might promote an alternative consideration of the potential rehabilitative utility and value from digital technologies in, around and after prison.

SIM CITY AND PUNISHMENT

Max Rutherford is the Head of Policy at the Association of Charitable Foundation, an organisation which aids other UK-based foundations and grant-making charities. On 11 August 2019, Rutherford tweeted a short thread about '*why Boris Johnson is wrong about prisons, isn't tough on crime, and why Sim City 2000 has all the answers*'. In the brief post, he reflected on his youth, and the playing of a computer game. He noted that as a child, he would occasionally play SimCity 2000 (Maxis, 1993). A feature of the game was that,

City Hall advisors, ambitious officials who would try to steer you, as Mayor, towards certain priorities and decisions. One of these was a crime advisor. He was always calling for more cops and more jails. Sometimes I'd follow his advice, only to find crime still went up. The jails got filled. The more I built; the more crime went up.

He recounted how on one occasion, his father, the noted criminologist Andrew Rutherford (Chair of The Howard League for Penal Reform at the time) glanced at the screen and saw him building a prison. Max recounted how his father had told him constructing more prisons was a waste of money and resources, posing to him that the most effective approach to crime reduction would be the construction of schools, hospitals and libraries. He also cited adequate housing, open green space, museums and (perhaps) more police officers. The young Rutherford explained to his father what the computer programmed advisors directed him to do (build more prisons), but he was urged by his father to try it. In the tweets Rutherford stated that he reluctantly followed that advice and '*I did It worked. Crime fell, tax income grew, people moved to town*'. Ending his indictment of Johnson, Rutherford noted

SimCity 2000 was grounded in evidence of what worked. It's a tragedy both for victims and people in the revolving door of crisis and crime that the Johnson government isn't.

Rutherford's chain of tweets drew upon the example of a simulation game that not often recognised within the crime computer games nexus, but essentially *SimCity 2000* (Maxis, 1993) was already using a 2D world building platform that would come to be the template for the most successful of digital prison video games, *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019). Prisons have become regular fixtures in late modern media. However, despite their ubiquity as a setting in the media entertainment industry, their place in video games is more limited. Those who have considered prison use broader themes of representation (Fawcett & Kohm, 2019; Levan, Cesaroni, & Downing, 2019). Far less research has been conducted examining representations of prisons and punishment within one of the most popular forms of contemporary entertainment media (Marsh, 2009). Video games as a medium are often neglected in texts on crime and media. David Kushner's *Jacked*, the story of the growth and success of Rockstar Games, which was built on the controversial content of *Grand Theft Auto* (Kushner, 2012), stands as a notable contribution given that the series has been both critically acclaimed and massively commercially successful, now being one of the most successful video game of all time. Rutherford's views are perhaps a useful departure from the usual parameters of debate over the connection between playing video games and real-world criminal behaviour that has subsided little in recent years in the West.

The question most frequently (and largely pointlessly re-debated) concerning console and computer video games is of course, that of their ability to cause or generate violence, and

many will be all too familiar with the 'do video games generate violence' as the stuff of simple introductory psychology. As the introduction to this collection suggests, this line of psychological and criminological inquiry has usurped a disproportionate amount of time and consideration. The rather tried, tired and tested concerns about the desensitisation effect have done little to stall the growing popularity of video games. How might video games be considered in criminology in a more considered and thoughtful manner?

This is a consideration which the cultural strand of criminology has arguably come to begin to grapple of late (Fawcett & Kohm, 2019). Such cultural criminology has begun to deal with the complexity of how games frame of reference wider knowledge about crime and its realities. For example, content framed around crime and criminality, and questions of choice and morality are now endemic in many successful video games such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) and *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010), whereas countless games place players in the role of heroic vigilante, crime fighter or bringer of law and order. Indeed, what is interesting is that even given this is how prison features very little. It is found as a setting in *Grand Theft Auto IV: The Lost and Damned* (Rockstar, 2009), where the central protagonist faces down a treacherous member of his Motorcycle Club by breaking into the fictional Alderney State Correctional Facility to execute him. We see it again within the Rockstar catalogue during a 'jailbreak' using a hot air balloon in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar, 2018). It also features in the backdrop of the *Batman Arkham* games (Rocksteady Studios, 2019) and in the *Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* (Starbreeze Studios, 2004), where the player takes the role of Riddick, a notorious convict who is being transported to a seemingly inescapable maximum-security prison. It is given a minor role in the opening mission within *Uncharted 4* (Naughty Dog, 2016), in which

the main protagonist has bribed his way into a foreign facility in a bid to uncover a rare treasure. But almost every representation of prison in video games is highly fictionalised, and hence in some ways, the idea that the coverage of prison in video games is so abstract that it could not possibly frame understandings of crime and criminality or prison realities. This is juxtaposed to other forms of media. For example, it has been extensively argued that ‘prison film’ and ‘TV prison drama’ may have a significant influence on popular culture and attitudes towards penal reform (Wilson & O’Sullivan, 2004).

As the setting of a contemporary game, the prison may not actually offer that much beyond inactivity, boredom and frustration. In England and Wales since 2010, HM Inspectorate of Prisons reports have continually charted a decline in meaningful activity and out of cell time, a result of an array of interconnected pressures that in many see prisoners turn to illegal drugs, feelings of being unsafe and significant deterioration in any measure of positive outcome. Only recently have criminologists attempted to turn their attention to how the conditions inside, often in and of themselves resulted in multifaceted forms of escapism, pleasure and leisure in prison space (Gooch & Sheldon, 2019). Of course, in the void created by falling staff numbers, high resources and austerity-driven budget cuts, violent crime, disorder and drug dealing have come to somewhat fill the void (Gooch & Treadwell, 2020; Treadwell, Gooch, & Barkam-Parry, 2019).

That insecurity, violence and crime have intensified against the framing of what official inspectors have suggested are ever deteriorating prison conditions (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, 2018) including increasingly impoverished regimes; austerity measures; and, the development of an increasingly lean staffing model within public sector prisons (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2015) resultant in staff shortages, low staff morale, declining staff confidence, recruited staff

leaving rapidly, a recruitment crisis and, certainly in some prisons, a decline in the legitimacy of staff–prisoner relationships and staff authority, permitting the emergence of forms of ‘extra-legal governance’ (Skarbek, 2016) – or simple ‘illegitimate governance’ – where prisoners were increasingly occupying roles of power and authority, previously the preserve of prison officers (also see Gooch & Treadwell, 2019). In light of this, prisons are not simply spaces of leisure (Gooch & Sheldon, 2019) but rather may be locking in harms. Ever fewer prisoners were (and are) being unlocked and fewer still accessed meaningful activities. For example, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons suggested in 2019 that 25% of prisoners were spending less than 2 hours out of their cell during the week; in Category B Local Prisons, this number increased to 37% as an average, and as much as 47% in the worst examples (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, 2019). Moreover, the prison ‘regime’ became increasingly unpredictable and inconsistent, fuelling frustration amongst prisoners (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, 2019, p. 34). In addition, when confined to their cells, too many prisoners were (and are) detained in squalid and unsanitary conditions, exposed to the elements, vermin and pests and with little or no clothing or bedding (National Audit Office, 2020). It is not all pizza and PlayStation, although, there are select examples of that in some of the organised crime cultures that proliferate tied to a drug economy in Britain’s prisons (Gooch & Treadwell, 2020; Treadwell et al., 2019).

Of course, that is not how criminology usually connects to video games. More common is thinking of games in terms of their potential to craft aggressive behaviours. Indeed, the tendency in social sciences to consider games in terms of effect on player certainly overrides any consideration of the way in which games, as a medium, impact upon crafting public attitudes, understandings and perceptions.

Indeed, the ways video games and the virtual worlds they sometimes represent have become very real and meaningful parts of everyday life for many people clearly suggest at the potential for representation coded into them to be a significant and useful consideration for those involved when considering attitudes to crime. Indeed, while traditionally criminology has given a great deal of attention to how images or film might shape public understandings (Wilson & O'Sullivan, 2004), little has considered the prison video games with the same vigour. Yet because the carceral realm and its nature are not a part of most people's lives, common understanding of what prison is, or is like, likely relies on mediated representation significantly.

Increasingly, video games can be viewed as both a part of the media complex, yet divergent from other forms of media with respect to their production, consumption and the level and degree of interaction they require. As Rutter and Bryce (2006) point out, game studies as a distinct field or discipline arise out of a perceived need to apply new and emerging theoretical and epistemological perspectives to the study of games. They make the argument that, as with forms of media, games are an important element of culture and suggest that comparisons are warranted even if disciplinarily approaches differ. Video games operate as a medium for a dialogue about society, not as an alternative world necessarily but as a social ecosystem that reproduces norms, attitudes and behaviours (Moran & Etchegoyen, 2017). For instance, simulation games, often referred to as 'sim' games, may both reflect and reproduce cultural and political meaning (Moran & Etchegoyen, 2017). They may wield power in that games are useful vehicles in which to model reality, but may also offer the potential of critiquing existing institutions and offering alternative solutions (Moran & Etchegoyen, 2017). If this is the case, what can we learn about the way in which the games industry has sought to utilise and understand the prison?

Ought it matter that overwhelmingly where the prison features in successful games, it is increasingly in the form of app simulation games that are either focused on prison building or management or prison escape?

SIMULATING IMPRISONMENT – PRISON GAMING AND THE SYSTEM

In one respect, one video game stands aside from all others in terms of its critical and commercial success. The now multi-platform building and simulation game, *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019), is undeniably the most successful of all prison-themed digital games, existing across a range of formats from mobile devices to the latest generational consoles. *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019) tasks the player with the construction and management of various private prisons. The game developed by Introversion Software was initially made available as a crowdfunded paid alpha pre-order on 25 September 2012. The game, now near on a decade later was acquired by Paradox Interactive for an undisclosed sum. As of 2015, *Prison Architect* had grossed over \$19 million in sales, and over 1.25 million units of the game had been sold. By the end of August 2016, when the final '2.0' of *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019) was released, the number of individual players was stated to be 2 million. A review, written upon the game's original release, noted that:

Prison Architect chills me to the bone. If played haphazardly it can be a wonderful farce rich with hilarious anecdotes, but played patiently and carefully it's a horror game, a top-down voyage into the heart of darkness, an eternal raging fire I forever try but can only fail to douse.

(Tycoon, 2012)

Prison Architect in many ways is a little fun and a lot of fiction. It was certainly not conceived as a mechanism for framing debates about the function of the prison in society, though as [Voorhees \(2009\)](#) suggests, it is not useful to discuss the representational power of games through the binary distinction of reality against fiction, indeed, games are ever, ‘limited, partial, and subjective simulations’ ([Voorhees, 2009](#); see also [Levan et al., 2019](#), p. 13). Prison Architect is a complex blend of play, simulation and fiction, and perhaps, some aspects of reality. The 2 million players of Prison Architect as a raw number is almost as high as the population cast into the vast Neoliberal US Penal Archipelago, where according to a 2018 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), some over 2.2 million adults were locked in America’s prisons and jails at the end of 2016. Arguably therefore Prison Architect ([Paradox Interactive, 2019](#)) has much power to shape perceptions, attitudes and narratives about what prisons are, or perhaps should be.

The game itself is a top-down cartoonish style of 2D (with a partially 3D mode) colourful construction and management simulation play, not dissimilar to games such as Lemmings ([DMA Design, 1991](#)) or the Sims ([Electronic Arts, 2000](#)) where the player takes control of building and running a successful (read profitable) prison which limits the potential for disorder and unforeseen events such as riots either by looking to secure prisoners’ compliance via rehabilitation (family visits and access to psychologists) or through use of repressive security (searching, armed riot officers and guard towers) with brutal violence and firearms deployed to quell murderous prison riots. The player is responsible for managing various aspects of their prison including building cells and facilities; planning and connecting utilities; hiring and assigning staff, including a warden, guards, workers and

more. The player needs to recruit staff to unlock more aspects of the game. The gamer is also responsible for the finances of their prison, and for keeping their inmates content. Hence the role becomes one of architect and manager with sandbox micromanagement themes such as choosing where to put lights, drains and how they connect.

If slanted more toward rehabilitation, players are able to add workshops to the prison as well as reform programs that reduce the specific prisoner's recidivism rate. However, they can also make profit by warehousing prisoners and taking an extreme, brutal and repressive security function. Such an approach, due to the embedded coding, will more likely create non-conformist, difficult and rebellious prisoners prone to disorder and riot. However, both options come with drawbacks, and hence in many ways the most effective approach is to strive for something more balanced, the game, as it were setting security and rehabilitation as vital competing and oppositional aims to be balanced.

The player tells the prisoners what to do indirectly by setting their schedule, with the game then challenging and tasking the player with confronting the supposed simulated realities of managing a large and volatile population; each with their own needs, desires and triggers. Layers are also provided with individual prisoner profiles including offence, age and biographical details of their family members. This detailed knowledge allows players to make individualised decisions on the best routes to take for prisoner incarceration, yet a lack of predefined character persona facilitates the importation of player- and community-derived preconceptions about the role and function of prison management. Players elect whether they want to focus primarily on incapacitation and warehousing or rehabilitation. For instance, players may choose to restrict movement with lockdowns, administrative segregation or solitary

confinement, thus opting for a more punitive approach to their prison management system. In contrast, they could primarily implement counselling, family visits and rehabilitative programs, allowing inmates opportunities for successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society upon release. Players may also select the institutional warden avatar. Such avatar personas present a range of extremes and much between. With players offered 'Rita', a zealous adherent of rules and discipline and security, in contrast to the pacifier governor who placates prisoners or the corrupt warden who benefits from the finding and resale of prison contraband.

Yet while in many ways the fictional gamification of building and managing prisons as either highly secure and repressive or more rehabilitative in some ways mimics debates in criminological and prison studies. For example, Jewkes' work has considered the transformative function and potential 'healing' or rehabilitative role of penal aesthetics. As many countries modernise their prison estates, replacing older facilities that are no longer fit-for-purpose with new, more 'efficient' establishments, this chapter discusses examples of international best (and less good) practice in penal and hospital settings. It reflects on what those who commission and design new prisons might learn from pioneering design initiatives in healthcare environments and asks whether the philosophies underpinning the 'architecture of hope' in health settings could be incorporated into prisons of the future. In contrast, much of the debate about contemporary imprisonment also recognises that increasingly, a focus on rehabilitation at the expense of security and safety may be naïve, and prisoners will take advantage of naivety where security is concerned. In *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019), the player gets their budget according to how many inmates they have, and narrowly where rehabilitation contrasted against profitable incarceration is key. This tension at the

heart of the game means that there is no perfect carceral setting, and for the player, crafting a perfect prison is impossible. Yet the contrast is ever between punitive or rehabilitative, and where the best solution is a balancing of both. However, in recent years, prison architect players have uploaded and shared thousands of their prisons for other players to download. Some of them are monstrously inhumane yet exorbitantly profitable. One user made a prison that has 12,000 solitary confinement cells for the entire prison population (<https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=424763027>). In contrast, even where players might attempt to craft a jail that is overwhelmingly reformist in its approach, the game is crafted to create problems where a small percentage of very violent prisoners will take advantage of lax security and cause issues. In many ways then, while striving for fictional simulation, *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019) seemingly gets very close to capturing some of the realities of contemporary prison policy in observing that the balancing of security and rehabilitation is incredibly complex and difficult.

GAMING IN PRISON: PLAYING IN THE SYSTEM

In contrast to the prison as represented in prison-based sim games such as *Prison Architect* (Paradox Interactive, 2019), which offers a particular understanding of the penal estate, the use and playing of video games in prison might give a quite alternate understanding of the realities of prison management and control. Video games have been a part of British prison life for several years now – not that they've slipped into the system without their share of critics. In August 2008, *Mai-Online* bemoaned the £221,726 of government money spent on 'Nintendo's and the like'. The piece quoted the go to voice

of dissatisfaction with any sort of liberal penal regime, Conservative MP Nigel Evans: ‘Does being sent down for five years of hard PlayStation serve as rehabilitation or punishment? People will be outraged by this revelation’. The fact that prisoners can get their hands-on video games bubbles back to the surface of tabloid acknowledgement, there’s always someone on hand with an indignant sound bite. In 2014, The *Daily Express* website under the header ‘Prisoners win fight to play latest games after becoming “bored” with old consoles’ (Dassanayake, 2014). Essentially the piece was heavy criticism of the Xbox 360 being permitted by prisons to replace older console machines in some prisons. The piece also featured the dissatisfaction of the Taxpayers’ Alliance alongside the eponymous and anonymous prison worker, who was quoted as saying: ‘If letting prisoners play the latest video games is cracking down, I’d hate to see what’s next – widescreen TVs, sofas, and takeaways in their cells?’ (Dassanayake, 2014). Of course, the emotional struggles experienced by male prisoners as they attempt to cope with the extreme demands of their environment invariably featured little. Rather, it pushed a well-worn line of prisons being places of luxury and comfort.

The stereotype of ‘country club’ or ‘holiday camp’ prisons are an established trope both in the United States and the United Kingdom. According to this rather simplistic and one-dimensional narrative, rather than prisons being places of cruelty and abuse, they are presented as coddling prisoners. Accordingly, prisons are depicted as easy, relaxed, leisurely and filled with undeserved privileges for a difficult and dangerous population likely to feign crocodile tears to gain advantages and usurp gains from naïve but well-intended prison administrators (Jewkes, 2002; Marsh, 2009). In the United States, Jefferey Ross (2012) traces this prevalent correctional myth back to a 1994 article published in *Reader’s Digest* by Robert James Bidinotto, ‘Must our Prisons be

Resorts?' which questioned why inmates are given prime rib and conjugal visits; a query that has now been repeated often in various forms (Ross, 2012) and still constitutes many of the dominant media representations of prison and imprisonment.

It is well documented that the prison regime has always sought to control and restrict forms of communication and that enforced isolation and loneliness is a major experience of imprisonment (Forsythe, 2004). Today in prisons in the United Kingdom, the Incentive and Earned Privileges scheme (the IEP system) formalises, facilitates and orchestrates access to communications, including in some cases video game consoles for enhanced and compliant prisoners. The system being an underlying mechanism for controlling prisoners and maintaining prison discipline. In April 2016, the author of a *Daily Mail* article entitled 'The Cushiest Jail in Britain' vehemently criticised plans to allow prisoners living at HMP Berwyn to access telephones in their cells, suggesting that this was 'fresh evidence that Britain's jails were becoming 'Holiday Camps' (Drury, 2016). This was of course not the first time that prisons have been accused of being too 'soft' and 'cushy'. As Gooch and Sheldon (2019) note, availability of televisions, subscription paid for channels, computer games, laptops; indeed any technology in prisons has long been controversial, frequently attracting negative media attention (see, for example, Barrett, 2015; Dixon, 2017; Drury, 2016; Gooch & Sheldon, 2019). Although generally held out as rewards for good behaviour and tied to a strict policing by officers and Governors (Crewe, 2009, 2011; Liebling, 2008), the available items are often described as 'luxuries'. Of course, a reality that contraband phones, drugs, weapons and narcotics similarly render the prison far from luxury, but rather a spartan setting in which rates of violence, crime, self-injury and suicide run high, as do social inequalities of poor education, poor employment, poor attainment, trauma, poverty. But this

disadvantage and locked-in social exclusion are not at the front and centre of British tabloid newsprint media reporting where prisoners (or cons and lags to use the press argot) routinely game rehabilitation and a soft liberal tendency to gain an easy life of relative luxury. Hence, for a number who position themselves as moral and social superiors of those in custody, prisoner is a group who should not in any way be placated through any form of inducement or reward, and certainly not the rewards of leisure time and a lifestyle (or game console and play time) that secretly mimics the more affluent middle class betters (see [Young, 2007](#)). Put simply, there is resentment to the idea that prisoners sat on their bunks playing video games and enjoying the easy life. This has been the focus of some news stories, with such headlines as ‘Britain too soft on crime say 80% of public, shock new survey reveals’ ([Sherwood, 2014](#)) and ‘Criminals are getting softer sentences in a bid to save UK’s crumbling prison system with NINE out of 10 appeals for extensions rejected’ ([Jehring, 2018](#)). It would appear that there are those members of the public (and particularly the right-wing tabloid news media) that seemingly want and indeed appear to expect prisons to feel like nineteenth-century institutions of severe and unremitting punishment. Obviously, within such austere regimes, there is no place for PlayStation. In prison architect terms, they do not want the rehabilitative parts, they want guard towers and riot cops.

Yet as an increasingly popular leisure activity, digital games are also permeating all aspects of society, and hence we perhaps ought to ask if such a narrow framing and understanding of the potential in video games is problematic. The question here may be to what extent might the rehabilitative function of video games be recognised and perhaps harnessed? We are beginning to recognise, for example, some of the cognitive and learning benefits that can be gained from video games such as how

influential on children's learning and development they can be. However, despite their pervasiveness and apparent importance within our society and culture, video games and new technologies are still largely ignored as part of our culture; readily dismissed as merely disposable, entertainment products, rather than a mechanism for fostering positive learning and good outcomes. They certainly are not seen as something linked in any way to productive society, and yet, this is spectacularly naïve and potentially neglects a clear rehabilitative potential found both in and amongst video games.

For example, the rise and growth of Esports (also known as electronic sports, e-sports or eSports), a form of competition using video games (which often takes the form of organised, multiplayer video game competitions, particularly between professional players, individually or as teams), is now a massive global business, so much so that competitions structured similar to American professional sports, with salaried players and regular season and play-off series have emerged, such as the *Overwatch* League (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). Indeed, the 2019 *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) World Cup featured 100 solo players and 50 duos who qualified for the event by competing in 10 weekly tournaments from April to June for a \$30 million prize fund. Esports are becoming ever more significant to the video game industry, with many game developers actively designing toward a professional esports subculture. As the British Esports Association suggests, as 'esports has developed, it has created thousands of new jobs across the world', and this is in many ways supplementary to the fact that the UK industry is the third largest in the world in terms of developer success and sales of hardware and software by country alone but fourth behind Canada in terms of people employed. The sheer size of the UK game industry means that it is comparable to its film or music industries, and yet, video games are still not regarded as akin

in creative and rehabilitative potential to music and arts. Where in prison rehabilitation calls is the recognition that such an industry might be one that offers prisoners different opportunities?

Indeed, even though the United Kingdom is home to some of the world's most successful video game franchises, such as Rockstar games *Grand Theft Auto*; the video game industry little features in any consideration in terms of literature on prisoner learning or employment. Indeed, the relationship between prisoner and video games is one that almost entirely commences at the point of regarding gaming as a potential technological security problem to be managed. Indeed, that is partly why prisoners who are allowed access to consoles are restricted only to game consoles that cannot connect to the Internet and to video games rated 18 or over by the BBFC. The irony of this is that at exactly this time, prisoners are finding ways to access the World Wide Web, and hence, in England and Wales in recent years, the prison has become a more publicly exposed place. The creation of 'HMP TV', a member only Facebook group (Burrows, 2016), and the reproduction of images of men flexing their muscles, partying, and misusing substances periodically appear in the local and national newspapers (Gordon, 2018; Marsh & Waterson, 2018). These images constitute a brazen violation of prison rules and conspicuously display the reproduction of hedonistic and narcissistic behaviours from within the prison walls, with the distribution and very creation of the medium based on the availability of illicit technology (mostly in the form of mobile phones).

In acting in such ways, prisoners can defiantly challenge the power of prison authorities. Videos captured on illicit fourth generation and Internet connected mobile phones recorded and posted from prisons show adult men helplessly squealing and screaming in pain as well as bizarre activities

(Burrows, 2016), such as being compelled to strip naked and pretend to be dogs on a lead (Scheerhout, 2016). The violence, 'fight clubs' and ritual humiliation featured in these mobile videos, which are subsequently uploaded to social media and Internet sites such as YouTube (Bhole, 2015), creating forms of commodified 'global humiliation' to be traded online. Is this preferable to prisoners playing video games in cells?

The United Kingdom is an internationally renowned start-up scene for innovative games and entrepreneurial developers of every stripe, from coders to designers to producers and developers – the kinds of artists who fundamentally shape the course of the industry now and into the future. What is the rehabilitative potential in recognising this? So many prisoners are creative and inventive. In the last year, the UK game industry contributed millions to the UK economy. In 2018, games accounted for more than half of the entire UK entertainment market outselling music and video combined, for the first time. Yet how is that recognised in prison rehabilitation initiatives?

Prison Architect (Paradox Interactive, 2019) is merely a fun prison simulation game, a form of escapism that plays on the building and effective management of prisons. In considering how to run prisons, players are not tasked with considering the placing of game consoles into prisoner's cells but rather, a relatively stark and binary choice of rehabilitation or repression facilitating imprisonment in pursuit of profit. Yet even in this short piece I have attempted to argue that as a vista it might be considered in a more meaningful way, with deeper thought, and in doing this we might make for better understandings of the tensions between security and rehabilitation and a more nuanced consideration of the wider way in which prison ought to be considered and understood in a changing digital age.

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CONCLUSION

Craig Kelly, Adam Lynes, and Kevin Hoffin

When we began this project, we wanted to challenge the lack of nuance in both academic and media discussions around forms of deviance and video games. The book's opening chapters sought to explain, at times quite bluntly, the inadequacies of traditional sociological theory that has usually been used to investigate the subject area. The chapters proceeding this then aimed to put forth arguments, from various academics of differing theoretical positionality, on the realities of deviancy in video games, hopefully raising questions which will stimulate further discussion upon the subject. As detailed within the opening, the editors aimed, at least for their sections, to draw upon the emerging deviant leisure perspective



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to situate their discussions within wider criminological issues. Within this, therefore, the concluding chapter aims to consolidate the various discussions and situate each subject matter within the deviant leisure perspective more directly.

SITUATING THE DISCUSSION

In the seminal paper, [Smith \(2016\)](#) outlines a four-point typology in which the various harms of the deviant leisure perspective are identified, enabling us to situate the proposed forms of deviancy within this collection to be placed. The four categories are subjective harms, environmental harms, socially corrosive harms and embedded harms.

Within the remit of the notions proposed here, it is mainly the subjective, socially corrosive and embedded harms which are exhibited. Environmental harms are perhaps identifiable within the industry, the primary example being prevalent folk law that the developers of the E.T. game ([Atari, 1982](#)) based upon the Steven Spielberg biopic. Due to the immense criticism of the game upon its release at Christmas of 1982, the developers reportedly took six semiarticulated trucks full of copies of the game and dumped them in a landfill in El Paso Texas. Such actions were, at the time, disputed by the developers. However, excavation of the site has since uncovered various copies of the game, one of which is now on display in the Smithsonian ([Robarge, 2014](#)).

The subjective harms are much more observable and prevalent throughout the contribution to the book. Within this discussion of the actuality of violence facilitated by and emerging from the gaming as a leisure form is the phenomenon of swatting proposed by Lamb. Within the chapter, Lamb details how such actions are implicating upon policing within the United States, highlighting the possibility and, perhaps, eventually a necessity

of policy being influenced due to the deviancy increasingly prevalent within some gaming subcultures. The chapter poses difficult questions, highlighting how leisure activities could be reorientating state violence as a tool for individuals to exercise their special liberty (Hall, 2012, 2015) to deadly means within areas of commodified leisure. Within this notion, the chapter offers swatting as possibly being typified within the remit of a socially corrosive harm. The sovereignty affords to the perpetrators and acted upon in purely self-prioritising actions over relatively minor sums of money, impacts much further than the intended victim. Within the terrestrial world, armed police forcibly entering the home reverberates around the wider community and familial home of the individual. This is before we even consider those whom engage in observing such acts as they are live-streamed or thereafter.

Most prominent throughout the contributions within the book though is the prevalence harms we would typify as embedded. Within the work of Smith (2016) and covered extensively by Raymen (2016) is gambling. This is utilised by Smith (2016) as the primary example of those harms which are successfully embedded within legitimate consumer culture and legitimised to a degree they are rarely perceived as a deviant act. Brown and Osman summarise the way in which gambling within the ludodrome is increasingly normalised. Most worryingly is the ‘surprise mechanics’ of the video game developers which are advertently targeted to a demographic that, in any other form, would be illegal. This chapter raises serious questions, which in the time of this book being collated have thankfully begun to gain traction, but as of the time of writing are yet to be taken seriously within society. We propose that within the consumer society that perpetually targets children from the outset (Hall, Winlow, & Ancrum, 2008, p. 95), such disavow of the widespread normalisation of gambling in the various forms

we can identify on gaming platforms will exacerbate the already widespread and damaging effects of the gambling industry highlighted by [Raymen \(2016\)](#) in the future. The normalisation of such nihilistic approaches to the pursuit of money and perceived status within the ludodromes also leads to what Kelly and Lynes propose as the democratisation of white-collar criminality.

Other areas the book has explored show areas of convergence between the typologies. As Hoffin and Lee Treweek observe, sexual and gendered violence is routinely commodified to varying degrees, normalising such socially corrosive behaviour within the ludodromes, and effect that could arguably resound much further into the social fabric of the demographics it targets. So too, the discussion of attitudes of LGBTQ communities by Colliver highlights the ability for prosocial ([Atkinson McKenzie, & Winlow, 2017](#); [Denham & Spokes, 2019](#)) ludodromes to achieve success within the market. Unfortunately, the most profitable gaming franchise in history uses the platform of consolidate and commodify harmful attitudes on a multitude of levels. Treadwell takes a vastly different approach to the majority of the contributions within this collection, highlighting the potentially prosocial and rehabilitative potential of engagement within the ludodrome within the UK prison population. Within this discussion, he raises important questions of the way in which video games are underutilised within the social sciences as a form of media that has equal potential to inform theoretical understandings of our lived reality within contemporary society.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In an age where the social world has been increasingly derogated ([Winlow & Hall, 2013](#)) and leisure activities leave

individuals more concerned with their representation of wealth through conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1965), we increasingly exist within a state of perpetual anxiety with an increasing lack of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). Within this, the individual's self-designated necessity to exercise their deepest desires is a key driving force of social interaction, which permeates across all aspects of their life course in what Hall conceptualises as exercising their special liberty (Hall, 2012). Within the ludodromes (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016), we observe a space in which consumer capitalism enables and promotes such behaviour in perhaps the most stark demonstration. It offers the individual the opportunity to exercise control over their existence, through the avatar, and resituate their perception of self in what appears to be a self-contained environment. However, this disconnection is fundamentally flawed. It is intrinsically tied to consumer capitalism, with the newest game or console being needed to be able to participate within the ludodromes. Extra financial investment is increasingly needed to fully participate within the games, with the latest 'skin' or shiny sword increasingly important for the individual to participate within the burgeoning economy of the virtual world which conspicuous consumption has now pervaded. For some individuals, the pursuit of success within the ludodrome has resulted in the actuality of violence; participation in real-world and virtual black-market's, criminal transgression in the form of white collar criminality, along with underage and problematic gambling. Meanwhile, the embedded harms from the terrestrial world impinge upon the pursuit of leisure time, with sexual violence and hateful content targeting marginalised communities commodified and profited from. Aside from all this, in addition to a driving force underpinning much of the content discussed within the book is the competitive culture of consumer capitalism which has suffused the leisure activity

with E-sports tournaments offering players the chance to win multi-million dollar prizes and E-sports degrees now offered by high educational institutes.

As the opening of this book demonstrated, the myopic discussion of video games being a causation of increasingly recurrent atrocities such as school shootings and other mass killings is highly problematic. Most importantly, such discussions stymie the public and policymakers from actively addressing the real underlying motivations of such actions. Such simplistic vitriol seeks to disavow the realities of such grave and catastrophic instances.

‘Running amok’ as a phrase can be traced back to Malaysian and Indonesian dialects. The phrase denotes an episode of sudden mass assault against people or objects, usually by a single individual, following a period of brooding that has traditionally been regarded as occurring especially in Malay culture. A description of such instances can be traced back to Captain James Cook, who encountered an incident during his voyages (Dames, 2010). The colonial explorer popularised the phrase, describing the incident as the ‘indiscriminate killing and maiming villagers and animals in a frenzied attack’. From this, it is evident that actions such as the mass shootings we witness on an all-too-regular basis within modern western culture as perhaps being more deeply embedded within the human psyche and various cultures worldwide. Obviously, within the sixteen century such actions would be perpetrated using knives and other such weaponry rather than the automatic rifles we observe in today’s context; thus, the ability for the perpetrator to damage a comparative number of victims was stifled. Nonetheless, it highlights the redundancy of the discussion of ‘video games cause violence’, aside from all the methodological and theoretical flaws detailed within the opening of this collection.

In closing, this book aimed to stimulate an intellectual exploration of the harms video games enable, cause and proliferate as a form of deviant leisure. At times it has stepped outside of the immediate theoretical approach to respond to such a call, something the editors welcome and are thankful for. By approaching the discussion of video games and the forms of deviancy associated with an inquisitive and enthusiastic manner, it is hoped this body of work will demonstrate that despite the media (and on occasion scholarly) approach of a black and white/good vs. bad debate, this book has hopefully demonstrated the actuality is shades of grey. Nuance can be ascertained within the discussion of video games and harm, and hopefully this book serves as a reference point to further such discussion.

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