

Virtually Dead or Criminally Alive: Crime as a Condition for Personal and National Agency in *Grand Theft Auto V*

Daiki UCHIDA*

This paper presents a case study that examines the so-called AAA (triple-A) video game *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*) by Rockstar. In Europe and North America, some scholars have recently begun exploring the possibilities of integrating the academic study of video games into the field of American studies. Within the context of this emerging field, the global popularity of video games at present, and the American origin of the medium, this paper elucidates how *GTA V* presents crime as an essential condition for exercising agency in the United States. The paper analyzes three aspects of *GTA V*: 1) its “game space” (or virtual world where the game takes place); 2) its game system (or mechanics), and 3) its narrative. It first focuses on how *GTA V*'s game space, Los Santos, a symbolically compressed virtual reproduction of Los Angeles, was created aesthetically. It then examines a key element of *GTA V*'s game system and mechanics—to its crime and escape sequences—to illustrate an implicit and mandatory aspect of gameplay that results in the game actually controlling players as much as liberating them. Finally, it argues that *GTA V* presents criminality as a privileged form of violence, which is only available to certain social groups, but which is simultaneously an essential condition of asserting and exercising agency in the US for both individuals and the nation as a whole.

1. INTRODUCTION

Some scholars have recently begun exploring the possibilities of integrating the academic study of video games into the field of American studies. In Europe and North America, researchers have already paid a great

*Keio University

deal of attention to the intriguing intersection of American studies and so-called “game studies.” In 2021, *The European Journal of American Studies* published a special issue entitled “Video Games and/in American Studies: Politics, Popular Culture, and Populism,” and in 2022, the journal *American Literature* also had a special issue entitled “American Game Studies.” These two issues address the massive popularity of video games in both the United States and other countries and consider a potential expansion of American studies to include game studies. For example, Mahshid Mayar and Stefan Schubert argue in the *European Journal* that “video games are the most popular and most commercially successful form of entertainment in the United States (and globally)” and that, “[c]onceived of as political, popular, and/or populist, video games can be understood to prompt player communities to explore the scope of their individual or collective experiences of the ludic as well as to emulate, question, and develop social practices and cultural norms within game environments that register ideological, political, and popular trends.”¹ Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski in *American Literature* assert that the term “game,” which is not necessarily limited to video games, has been seen as a key concept in understanding culture and society since the middle of the twentieth century.² Given the global popularity of video games at present and the American origin of the medium—the earliest of them, such as *Tennis for Two* (1958), were born as a byproduct of the nuclear arms race during the Cold War—we should now consider their importance in American studies.³

Within this context of the emerging field of game studies, this paper presents a case study that critically examines the so-called AAA (triple-A) video game *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*), which was developed by Rockstar North and released by Rockstar Games in 2013. *GTA V* is one of the bestselling video games of all time. According to a survey, it has sold over 200 million units so far, making it the third best-selling game, behind only *Tetris* (520 million) and *Minecraft* (over 300 million).⁴ *GTA V* is an open-world action-adventure “shooter game” and the latest released entry in the *GTA* series, which began in 1997.⁵ While *GTA V* allows its players to freely explore Los Santos, a vast and elaborate, but condensed virtual, reproduction of Los Angeles, the main objective of the game is for players to complete various criminal “missions” (i.e., exaction, theft, robbery, and murder). Some other video games portray, although not necessarily endorse, crimes or other unsocial acts as a means of resistance against a greater evil or as a survival tactic in desperate situations. For example, the *Red Dead Redemption* series, also published by Rockstar Games, depicts the criminal

lives of outlaws in the West in the early twentieth century. However, the series portrays the plight of outlaws forced by circumstances to turn to crime as tragic, emphasizing the outlaws' precarious existence as victims of a changing society at the turn of the century. However, in the end, the outlaws always meet miserable or brutal deaths, as if their dying in such gruesome ways was both the inevitable consequence of their crimes and the means by which they received redemption for them. Unlike these other video games, *GTA V* presents crime as an entertaining element for play.

Since its outset, the *GTA* series has been characterized by its strong emphasis on criminality and the dream of making it big on the dark side of American society, creating symbolic representations of cityscapes based on real American cities: Liberty City (New York), Vice City (Miami), and San Andreas and Los Santos (California and Los Angeles). Dan Houser, the co-founder of Rockstar North, states that "*GTA* is America. With this game, I think, we're very happy with the location. It let us do something iconic."⁶ Especially, what the *GTA* series makes iconic via those virtual reproductions of American metropolises is players' freedom to do anything. The series pushes this idea to the extreme by affording players a mode of play in which they can even simulate serious crimes in its digitalized American cities. Houser asserts that such "player agency and freedom" are the most important aspects of *GTA V*.⁷ In *GTA*'s America, players are free to commit crimes, such as theft, robbery, and murder, without any actual risk or social responsibility.⁸ This is an important part of *GTA V*'s game experience. "From the safety of the armchair and a gamepad," players are allowed to enjoy a simulation of crime in a virtual space where no social or legal consequences will ensue.⁹

Previous academic studies have stressed the theme of free agency and the pleasure of deviance in *GTA V* and the *GTA* series, underlining the absence of legal liability and social consequences in its game space, which enables players to simulate the subversion of social norms and enjoy black humor that criticizes the vanity of American life.¹⁰ Furthermore, these studies argue that antisocial acts that can be played out in a safe and pleasurable way represent a magical escape into the dream world that Southern California has traditionally been believed to epitomize: the promised land of freedom and wealth. One can experience a safe and free simulation of life, one that would be implausible in reality. Thus, Los Santos has been seen as a safe playground severed from reality, a simulated substitution of Los Angeles for the sake of escapism. This perception aligns with Los Angeles' aesthetic image as the city of crime, as depicted in literature and film.

However, these previous studies simplify the complicated role of criminality in *GTA V* in terms of both game mechanics and narrative, and they also tend to idealize the criminality depicted in *GTA V* by viewing it as an escapist liberation from, or subversive resistance to, the American utopian dream of freedom and wealth. Moreover, they tend to overlook the interactive aspect of video games.¹¹ In video games, players must more or less follow the instructions of “game systems,” the set of game mechanics players need to negotiate to progress and complete the in-game objectives. In *GTA V*, players are required to play the role of a criminal. Criminality is represented as a fun form of deviance, but it is also a restriction the game imposes on its players.

To explain criminality’s complex role in *GTA V*, this paper illuminates and analyzes three aspects of the game: 1) its “game space” (or virtual world where the game takes place); 2) its game system (or mechanics), and 3) its narrative. It first focuses on how *GTA V*’s game space, Los Santos, a symbolically compressed virtual reproduction of Los Angeles, was created aesthetically. It then examines a key element of *GTA V*’s game system and mechanics, its crime and escape sequences, to expose an implicit and mandatory aspect of gameplay that results in the game actually controlling players as much as liberating them. Finally, it argues that *GTA V* presents criminality as a privileged form of violence, which is an essential condition of asserting and exercising agency in the United States for both individuals and the nation as a whole.

2. GAME SPACE: LOS SANTOS, A VIRTUAL THEME PARK OF CRIME

GTA V presents sixty-nine main story missions that every player must complete if they want to progress through the main story.¹² It features three protagonists, the most central of whom is Michael Townley. Michael is a former bank robber who was once one of the most wanted criminals in the United States. To quit his dirty business, he made a secret deal with Dave Norton, an agent of the Federal Investigation Bureau (FIB), which is obviously based on the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Michael pretended to be shot to death by Dave, thereby enabling the otherwise “unremarkable” agent to have a successful career in the FIB.¹³ As part of that illegal agreement, Michael received a fake identity and now lives as Michael De Santa, spending a rich and peaceful life with his family in a mansion in an upper-class residential area of Los Santos.

However, Michael feels that his life is meaningless. One day, he

discovers that his wife has slept with her tennis coach and chases him to take revenge on him, but during the chase, he happens to damage the house of a gang lord, who demands a huge sum of money in compensation. To pay the gang lord, Michael decides to return to his former life of crime and begins consorting with his friends Trevor Philips, a sociopath who was his best friend and was once a member of his gang; Franklin Clinton, a young African American who dreams of making it big in a street gang in Los Santos; and Lester Crest, a disabled hacker and the brains of the gang. However, this means that Michael has broken the secret deal with Dave, who soon finds out and blackmails him with the help of Dave's boss at the FIB Steve Haines. If it were revealed that Michael is alive and his death was merely a fraud, all of them would be doomed. Thus, in exchange for Dave and Steve deleting his criminal records at the Bureau, Michael begins working for them undercover which provides him the opportunity to again be involved in crime this time under the authority of the FIB. Although Michael was initially uncomfortable cooperating with the FIB, he gradually senses that committing crimes again gives some purpose to his life.

Los Santos is a photorealistic but compressed representation of Los Angeles. Some reviewers even suggest that the city itself is the protagonist.¹⁴ Rockstar North put tremendous effort into reproducing a digitalized version of Los Angeles and capturing its very atmosphere through "more than a hundred days of research" and "thousands of photographs and hours of digital video."¹⁵ In fact, there are various locations in the game that are based on the real ones in Los Angeles: The Vinewood Sign (The Hollywood Sign), Rockford Hills (Beverly Hills), the Oriental Theater (Grauman's Chinese Theater), the Galileo Observatory (the Griffith Observatory), Del Perro Pier (the Santa Monica Pier), and Arcadius Business Center (John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel). Thus, Los Santos has a certain level of verisimilitude, which may enhance the immersive feelings players experience.

The city represents its aesthetic essence and compresses it into a quite scaled-down version on a computational grid.¹⁶ *GTA V's* intention is for players in fact to experience Los Angeles to a greater degree than they can in reality, because Los Santos is "a love letter to the synthetic Los Angeles of the imagination."¹⁷ In other words, Los Santos is designed as a collective representation of Los Angeles. It is not simply a cartographic reproduction of Los Angeles but, rather, a representation of the accumulated cultural image of Los Angeles that has been produced through films and novels in the twentieth century. Houser asserts: "We've toned down its sprawling

nature in Los Santos—we compressed the city somewhat so that it never felt dull, but everything is there, including those special mental characters and moments you just wouldn't experience anywhere else."¹⁸ Thus, it is "an extremely realistic version of a Los Angeles that doesn't actually exist."¹⁹

In a sense, Los Santos may be similar to Los Angeles' Bonaventure Hotel, which, as Fredric Jameson observes, reflects the surrounding city through its glass windows, and thus *GTA V* may help the city understand itself through a specular simulation.²⁰ This self-reflection may also recall the image of Southern California as a land of simulation, as Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco describe it.²¹ In this respect, Los Santos could be seen as a twentieth-first century version of such a city of simulation, which one observes not through the glass windows of the hotel but, rather, through a computer screen or TV monitor. Thus, Los Santos represents a virtual Los Angeles that reflects "the symbolic and social reality of that city."²²

Based on conventional criminal images of Los Angeles that have been cultivated in West Coast culture, Los Santos is represented as the city of crime and violence. In fact, cultural representations of Los Angeles have long highlighted what Mike Davis describes as the "noir" atmosphere, in contrast to the gilded façade of the Californian "sunshine."²³ The origin of the Southern Californian dream can be traced back to the Gold Rush of 1848 and the ensuing explosion of capitalism.²⁴ However, since then, a dark image of Los Angeles has developed as a kind of backlash against the bright image, underlining its "double role of utopia *and* dystopia for advanced capitalism." (italics in original)²⁵ Within this tradition, the literary and cinematic "noir" image of corruption and guilt in Los Angeles has been formed by novels such as Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust*, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe series, and Thomas Pynchon's Californian Trilogy (*The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland*, and *Inherent Vice*), and films such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. With this cultural tradition, Los Santos is endowed with "the criminal 'aura' of the city."²⁶ This dark image of the city stresses its political corruption, the end of the capitalist dream, and the collapse of freedom in the city due to the chaos of crime. As Jameson argues, the city is "the microcosm, in the darkness of a local world without the benefit of the federal Constitution, as in a world without God."²⁷ In alignment with these traditional representations of Los Angeles, *GTA V* creates Los Santos as an "America as a playground of violence: a theme park of aggression, shooting, and speed," where players can experience "both real and imagined spaces" of Los Angeles.²⁸

The image of Los Angeles as a city of crime helps *GTA V* offer Los Santos as “a game to escape in.”²⁹ Rockstar North gives a twist to the dark image and transforms Los Angeles into a ludic space, a space for the fun and pleasure of deviance that players are encouraged to dive into without any concern about any social consequences or moral conflicts. Indeed, the denial of responsibility in the game space characterizes the entire *GTA* series thus far.³⁰ While playing the game, players can chase the dream of becoming a criminal and living a boisterous and unruly life, at least for a short period of time. Severing the game world from the real one, *GTA V* gives players temporary relief from real life, and it also allows them to “enjoy the *American Dream* with [their] own villa[s], fast cars and attractive women,” while “social desirability and moral value systems are neglected, if not completely ignored, for the duration of the game and thus take on a background function.”³¹ In so doing, *GTA V* offers its players the opportunity to enjoy mostly male-centric, virtual free agency in the game, providing them with ease and safety even when they are engaged in illegal acts. This vicarious experience evokes a sense of competence in navigating social hierarchies within a virtual city with no social responsibility or risk. Thus, *GTA V* is “an appropriate medium for satisfying escapist motives” and “crossing borders.”³² One can cross the borders of identity by becoming another person, even temporarily, and obfuscate the borders between the real and the virtual by diving into the digitalized city. The no-risk criminality of Los Santos allows players to feel free to do anything or nothing, providing “modalities of play and the freedom to select between them.”³³

The no-risk ludic environment in Los Santos, however, not just encourages but also compels players to become more active criminals therein. In video games, players “must initiate the events that ensue by involving themselves in a kind of vicarious performance within a fictional representational world” via hardware such as a game console, gamepad, and screen.³⁴ Such an effort enhances the peculiar character of video games as an interactive medium. In this respect, video games are often distinguished from other existing media, such as novels, films, and plays, because video games demand more active and, sometimes, aggressive engagement of their recipients; therefore, terms such as “interaction,” “participation,” and “immersion” are often regarded as the most crucial concepts in game studies.³⁵ The game’s narrative cannot unfold within the game world without players’ interactivity. Although other media demand recipients’ engagement as well, the degree of engagement demanded of game players

is much higher. Espen J. Aarseth argues that video games can be included in what he calls “ergodic literature,” in which “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader [to] traverse the text,” unlike other media, which require “no extranoematic responsibilities.”³⁶ Whereas characters in other media are objects of voyeuristic desire within readers’ or viewers’ gaze, playing video games demands “kinaesthetic performance.”³⁷ As discussed in the next section, this characteristic of video games means that the free-wheeling criminality in which players can indulge in Los Santos may not in fact represent free agency at all, but instead actually undermine players’ sense of self-determination because realizing the objectives of the game gives them no choice but to continually commit crimes.

3. GAME SYSTEM AND MECHANICS: ESCAPE OR CONFINEMENT

Although *GTA V* offers players the opportunity to perpetrate crimes for fun at will, a crucial component of game play is that players must contend with the serious risks that accompany crime in real life. In *GTA V*, committing crimes is only half of game play; the other half is intricately connected with escaping from in-game enemies, that is, shaking off pursuers such as the police, sheriffs, or SWAT teams. Players cannot avoid this if they attempt to complete in-game missions and progress through the main story. In this respect, *GTA V* cleverly enables players to indulge as “escapists” in two senses of the word. First, it provides an escapist fantasy in which players are granted the freedom to do anything, even if it is illegal. And at the same time, players can enjoy escaping from the police after committing crimes as a principal part of *GTA V*’s game system. But although criminality in *GTA V* operates as a type of liberating, privileged deviance for players to enjoy, it is also a systemic limitation that the game imposes on the players.

These two aspects of play that operate interdependently are enabled by the design of the policing system represented within the game. As the game encourages players to commit crimes, its policing system increases players’ self-consciousness or vague suspicion that they are being surveilled via the element of the game that requires players to escape the police to progress through the main story. In Los Santos, whenever a player steals a car, robs a bank, or murders a person, a star or stars (five at the maximum) appear in the top right corner of the screen. Then, the player must escape by hiding in a sewer, an underground parking lot, or an abandoned subway rail line until their pursuer gives up. The number of stars on the screen indicates

how seriously the player is wanted by law enforcement and, thus, being chased. In addition, during the pursuit, nearby pursuers' fields of view are shown by red triangular fields on the mini-map in the bottom left corner of the game screen. The surveillance systems made tangible via the heads-up display (HUD) on the screen and the run-and-chase component suggest "a conceptual map" of a game space projected onto the game screen that visualizes the otherwise concealed surveillance as on-screen information.³⁸ In so doing, *GTA V*'s game space embodies "a new epistemology of policing" with the help of technologized surveillance that Davis anticipated would become characteristic of Los Angeles.³⁹

This type of policing of the players' whereabouts within Los Santos could undermine players' sense of personal agency in playing the game, resulting in a kind of paranoid suspicion that there is always a watchful eye on or a controlling hand over them. The game system encourages players to run away from the surveillance system, but it will never allow them to do so because surveillance is an integral aspect of the game itself. Game components such as a "satellite view sequence that zooms out from one character's location and then zooms in on another's" when players switch between playable characters in the game exacerbates this feeling of being continually watched.⁴⁰ The satellite sequence suggests to players that they cannot avoid being the monitored objects while playing the game. The surveillance system may provide players with the pleasure of sometimes successfully escaping an apparently powerful policing system, leading to a temporary sense of liberation. However, at the same time, the fact that the satellite sequence allows players to see how the entire city of Los Santos and its vastness are under surveillance may evoke in players the sense of what Edward Relph defines as "absurdity," a feeling that they are being controlled and contained within something huge, a feeling that is caused by "views of cities from the air" or "rationally designed landscapes laid out with a mathematical precision regardless of topography."⁴¹

Furthermore, the open, playful space of Los Santos is built on a computational grid, and players' awareness of this may minimize their actual experience of free agency. On the surface, the space seems to suggest that players can do anything therein, but it is in fact an entirely controlled space constructed by the designers who set the parameters of the game. While it appears to welcome players' engagement with it, it simultaneously requires them to observe the rules set down by the designers. This framework suggests that Los Santos constitutes what Scott Bukatman calls a "terminal space," a metaphysical space of computerization in

which the borders between the physical and the electronic dissolve and an individual becomes a “terminal subject” whose conventional concept of the themselves has been terminated and who is now trapped within “the invisibly penetrating network of satellites and terminals.”⁴² In fact, in association with the image of Los Angeles as a city of information technology, this type of terminal space had earlier been depicted in American postmodern science fiction such as the 1982 film *Tron* and the 1992 novel *Snow Crash*. What is important here is that not only characters but also players are literally entrapped within this “terminalized” virtual environment emanating from their electronic screens. This environment not only serves as a central ludic space, providing the affordance of play, but also confines players within the space, imposing on them a game system of confinement that is nearly impossible for them to ignore.

In this sense, players are terminalized subjects. Video games subjugate them to interact through the game console, a terminal, via which they access the game space. Therefore, even though *GTA V* seems to embellish its “framework” with a range of “possible actions” in it, highlighting players’ agency with its free-to-do-anything game concept,⁴³ there are not as many possibilities for action as it seems to offer, because, as Greg Singh puts it, if players “‘can’ do something, it does not necessarily follow that one is ‘free’ to do it.”⁴⁴ Thus, the range of affordances *GTA V* provides is not enlarged by the possibility of committing many different types of crimes in it; rather, it is quite limited because there is no way of communicating within its game world or with inhabitants without engaging in crime or violence.⁴⁵

In Los Santos, vehicles are not used for everyday transport, but are meant for running away from the police, purposelessly running over random passersby on the street, or simply causing car crashes for fun. Bottles, baseball bats, and golf clubs are hardly meant for their original uses; they are more weapons than tools. In addition, non-playable characters always show antagonistic attitudes toward players. They swear and even start attacking when players walk past them or stand nearby for a while. The measurement for winning in the game depends only on the acquisition of in-game money and luxurious commodities,⁴⁶ which can hardly be obtained except through the criminal acts that in-game missions encourage players to engage in, such as collecting money from debtors by force, stealing vehicles, robbing banks, and assassinating people. The unavoidability of these acts “undermine[s] the complacent enjoyment of violence which *GTA V* elsewhere encourages.”⁴⁷ The game presupposes its players’ coerced complicity in in-game crimes,

entrapping and confining them via the game's mechanics.

4. GAME NARRATIVE: CRIMINALITY AS A CONDITION FOR PERSONAL AND NATIONAL AGENCY

In *GTA V*, crime is the vehicle by which people assert their agency, serving as a source of empowerment to them personally and to the United States as a nation more generally. In the case of *GTA V* protagonist Michael, crime appears to be something he cannot live without. Having “got out alive” from his former criminal life after making a secret deal with the FIB, he is able to lead a seemingly ideal retired life under the alias De Santa with a great deal of money and freedom despite his past criminal career. His present lifestyle “underline[s] a way of life in Los Santos (and equally Los Angeles),” a sumptuous life of “limitless money, excess consumption, and also mass gullibility,” which is exaggerated by in-game billboards and websites.⁴⁸ However, in contrast to this apparently bright image of a rich life that the Southern Californian dream has idealized, the fluctuation of his identity between that of his former life as an accomplished criminal and that of his current life as a retired middle-aged man makes the absence of the sense of legitimacy in his life more obvious. In the mission “Franklin and Lamar,” Michael reflects on his earlier criminal life as a bank robber and asserts that crimes were for him the “opportunities” and “achievements” that enabled him to fulfill the Southern Californian dream.⁴⁹ However, he also reveals: “They got me right fucking here. The end of the road! With a big house and a useless kid and I’m stuck talking to you because no one else gives a shit. Oh, I’m living the dream, baby, and that dream is fucked!”⁵⁰ Despite his apparent success in terms of material wealth, Michael has lost his *raison d’être* in his “fucked” dream life. The life he has attained by virtue of his criminal career is not what he most deeply desires. He says, “I got money, it just makes you miserable.”⁵¹ Indeed, what he desperately yearns for instead is to return to committing crimes, because it is a “part of Michael’s individual calling, or even human nature.”⁵²

Crime is integral to Michael’s very being. It once formed his identity as a well-known public enemy in the country, and he now suffers from the loss of that identity. Because of Michael’s officially being dead, he can lead a peaceful and luxurious life as De Santa. Of course, Michael is not actually dead; he simulated his death and experienced a rebirth as another person under an alias. In this sense, Micheal’s entire being is “virtual”: his true identity as Michael Townley is “virtually dead” and his current existence

as Michael De Santa is “virtual” in its very essence because it is fictitious. Franklin describes that, given Michael’s current existential situation, it is as if he were “a corpse [that] briefly reanimates itself and terrorizes everyone.”⁵³ Because of the secret deal requiring his virtual death, Michael has lost his connection to society and has been unable to find anything meaningful in his current life. In a sense, he is a zombie-like entity who is liberated from physical and social restraints, an existence in which he is only an empty shell, that is entirely removed from what once constituted him. He has literally lost all meaningful agency in his life. What Michael now possesses derives not from what he has gained as Michael De Santa, his assumed identity to cover up his past, but from Michael Townley, the “officially” dead bank robber. Therefore, he has been left with no connection to what he believes actually makes him who he is as a person. He is now featureless, except for his rich life which he once dreamed of, but now experiences in actuality as a meaningless “fucked” existence, filled with suffering from his impotence as a person.⁵⁴ For Michael, crime is the source of his agency in the world, and his sense of being alive depends on it.

GTA V further uses the link between criminality and personal agency to highlight issues of oppression and exclusion in US society. It does so by its choice to make the lead criminal characters “representatives of historically disadvantaged sociocultural groups” in the United States: Italian Americans (Michael), African Americans (Franklin), the “hillbilly” or white underclass (Trevor), and disabled hackers (Lester).⁵⁵ Trevor describes the makeup of the group to Michael: “You are a man of action... Franklin, he makes us multicultural. Lester makes it cyber. We’re like modern America. We just get ourselves a gay friend.”⁵⁶ Trevor’s words underscore *GTA V*’s symbolic empowerment of oppressed people by giving the characters agency through what is most highly valued in the game—crime.

However, Trevor leaves out other oppressed groups who therefore are not able to partake in the symbolic empowerment the game offers. The absence of female characters renders the empowering criminality portrayed in the game to be male. In this respect, Trevor’s words reveal *GTA V*’s limited view of the empowerment that criminality provides symbolically, showing some people as included in, but others excluded from, this vision of “modern America.” In other words, the empowerment of criminality depicted in *GTA V* is only afforded to certain social groups. Asked about the absence of any lead female character in *GTA V*, Houser explained: “It didn’t feel natural for this game.... [T]hese were the characters what [*sic*] would display the themes we wanted to think about,”⁵⁷ although Houser failed to

clarify what those “themes” actually were. More broadly, *GTA V*’s choice of characters in the video game illuminates who is missing from US society. It highlights sociopolitical problems relating to class and ethnicity by whom it includes, but its male-centric focus limited to particular oppressed groups reveals not only the societal disempowerment of women but implicit disregard for other oppressed groups not represented in the game. At least for the leading male characters in *GTA V*, criminality stands for power and solidarity despite their disadvantages and differences.

In addition, *GTA V* depicts an element of criminality in the nature of governmental authority, through its storyline that highlights complicity between law enforcement agents and criminals. Criminality is not simply an attribute possessed by the criminal protagonists who are represented as being on the side of the oppressed. It is also a means by which individual law enforcement officers advance their personal interests, government agencies attempt to gain power against rival agencies, and government agencies more broadly exert their influence and authority domestically within the society as a whole. As Michael’s secret deal with the FIB suggests, law enforcement officials in Los Santos are corrupt. They do not hesitate to execute illegal operations or cooperate with criminals like Michael and his gang, because they justify such acts as necessary to fight other criminals effectively. For example, the “Blitz Play” mission demonstrates not only this organizational corruption but also the arbitrary and capricious relationship between law and crime. FIB agents Dave and Steve suggest a secret operation to strengthen the domestic power of their organization in relation to that of the International Affairs Agency, obviously a stand-in for the Central Intelligence Agency, and referred to as the “Agency” here:

DAVE: Listen. We need help with something else. Some of the government. Some of it is pretty corrupt.

TREVOR: Not err—not your bit, right?

DAVE: Yes, but we’re corrupt in a good way.

STEVE: But the Agency, they want to encourage panic so they can guarantee their budgets. That’s how they get paid.

DAVE: It’s a major problem.

STEVE: And now they’ve secured some funds that we need to use in our fight against crime. As a way of bribing corrupt officials.

MICHAEL: Really? And where are they getting that from?

STEVE: Drugs. Those bastards love to sell drugs.

TREVOR: Who doesn't? Right?

STEVE: We think they're gonna use this money to finance a war on our streets, and we need you boys to requisition that money for us.⁵⁸

This fierce competition between law enforcement agencies in the game is illustrative of how actual governmental organizations fight each other for money, not necessarily for the good of the public to protect people from crime, violence, or terrorism, but to enhance their own power and authority in society. Furthermore, when Dave and Steve sense that their own positions in the FIB are endangered, they do not even hesitate to fight against their own organization. In the "Cleaning out the Bureau" mission, Steve explains to Michael and Lester that "I've even got some fools in our own Bureau that are questioning my methods. They think I'm a liar, a cheater, some kind of a killer and a thief" and tells Michael and Lester that they must wipe out some "evidence" against him.⁵⁹ Just as Dave made use of Michael's fake death to further his career in the bureau, Steve's declaration of FIB's "fight against crime" in the above dialogue is at its heart self-interested. It and Dave's earlier actions are part of their overall fight to obtain more authority and power in the FIB. It more broadly stands in for a means of maintaining and strengthening the vested interests and privilege that law enforcement organizations and their officials more generally seek to have.

This intertwining of criminality with a personal and organizational sense of agency also entails willful ignorance. The lead characters do not seem to show moral conscience when they take the money or even the lives of others, as if crime were just a part of everyday life. This indifference to the human cost of their crimes suggests that the existence of criminality and its corresponding violence may be too prevalent and naturalized to raise moral questions.⁶⁰ The dialogue between Michael and Lester in "The Bureau Raid" mission is illustrative:

MICHAEL: What the fuck ever happened to burying the past, huh?
Any fool should be able to turn over a new leaf, right?

LESTER: Well, first your new leaves aren't so very different from your previous leaves. Seems like they all fell from a pretty similar tree, and second, this is the age of the internet, my Luddite friend. And nothing is forgotten. There are no new leaves. Everything you do and don't do is recorded forever

and used to beat you. This is the age of judgment day, every day. And in revelation of that, I'd say that you've got off pretty lightly, what with all the murders, and the thefts, and—

MICHAEL: Alright.⁶¹

Lester's ironic comment about Michael's criminal career evidences Michael's presumptuousness and his either obliviousness or deliberate disregard for the impact of his crimes. Indeed, in his last heist as Michael Townley, Michael says to a guard who attempts to stop him: "You forgot a thousand things every day. How 'bout you make sure this is one of 'em?"⁶² This comment seems to underscore the naturalization of criminality and the fact that it has become such an inherent part of life that it is invisible to most people and transparent. As seen with respect to Michael as well as FIB agents Dave and Steve, crime is indispensable because it is crucial in reinforcing a solid sense of personal agency for each of them. *GTA V* presents criminality as something powerful that can provide meaning, a sense of self-efficacy, and authority to individuals as well as organizations, while exposing how people have become so inured to it that they do not even recognize it. Indeed, *GTA V* conveys crime to be an integrated and essential component of US society, a fact which the society appears to willfully overlook.

GTA V's recognition of the centrality of crime in American society is consistent with Singh's observation that the US has repeatedly relied on violence to unjustly deprive others of their property, "reiterat[ing] the notion of the US mainland as a former colonial territory-turned-Neo Imperialist power."⁶³ US history demonstrates how the country has mythologized and justified centuries of perpetrating violence intended to take property from others, be it their land, resources, money, or lives.⁶⁴ As Trevor asserts when he cooperates with the FIB, "our past indiscretions would be forgotten in a haze of patriotic fervor."⁶⁵ The FIB, whose law enforcement operations entail the agency's engaging in criminality itself, exemplifies the often arbitrary relationship between law and crime, underscoring how personal or institutional interests have frequently dictated the criteria for determining what constitutes a crime, leaving inconvenient facts ignored. Thus, the criminalized nature of the FIB points to America's own sense of its national agency as something that is secured, privileged, and intrinsically bound to criminality. If it were not for such an intertwining of criminality and violence, neither could Americans exercise personal

agency, nor could the country assert national agency. However, this calls into question the legitimacy of both types of such agency, underlining its brutality and implying the inherent illegitimacy of American capitalist accumulation that life in Los Santos idealizes.

Even while Michael advises Franklin in the “Father/Son” mission that he should live a life without crime, Michael asserts how American capitalism demands deprivation of others: “Go to college. Then you can rip people off and get paid for it. It’s called capitalism.”⁶⁶ For him, criminality and capitalism seem to be two sides of a coin. The fact that both Michael’s own life of criminality and the ostensibly legitimate life he encourages Franklin to pursue rely on taking property from others suggests that depriving others is a defining presupposition of US society; it is a normative action without which the society can hardly describe itself. In the world of *GTA V*, crime is essential to individuals in order to be someone or something in this over-criminalized US society and to the nation itself to advance.

5. CONCLUSION

GTA V not only illustrates through its fictional characters how crime can provide the basis for people to feel agency in their lives, but it also allows players to directly experience it through its game space, system/mechanics, and narrative. It offers a mode of play that features Los Santos as a city of crime where players can enjoy no-risk illegal acts via their avatars. Describing such a criminal life, Michael states: “You know, I’ve been in this game for a lot of years.”⁶⁷ As his ambiguous dual identity suggests, being absent from one’s true self in the game results in a state of virtual death: a person can do nothing effectual or meaningful and, therefore, has no substantial agency. This suggests what Alexander R. Galloway calls a “parallel ‘allegorithm,’” an allegory of real life represented within the algorithm of a game.⁶⁸ In this respect, players have performative complicity with Michael. As Michael plays his “game” of crime, the players play the video “game” in which Michael is the protagonist and must allow themselves to be subject to how its codes, mechanics, and narrative function. Exercising one’s agency in the “game” is possible for both Michael and players only when they participate in crime. In this sense, they all are game players who cannot interact with the world of Los Santos or assert their agency without assuming the presumed role of a criminal. This is the very game that they are forced to be engaged in as long as they play.

GTA V maps out a pervasive criminalized element of the landscape of

American society via its emphasis on ludic criminality presented in Los Santos. In so doing, it maintains that criminality is an essential condition for both Americans' personal sense of agency and the country's agency as a nation. While in the game, crime acts as a male-centric source of symbolic empowerment to those who are socially disadvantaged as well as for those already in power, it denies this sense of empowerment to women and other oppressed people who are silently excluded from the game. In this way, *GTA V* also addresses deep-seated social issues in US society, suggesting that the symbolic empowerment of criminality as a source of agency is not accessible to everyone. Although the historical normalization of American's criminality renders most of the American public not actively aware of it, *GTA V* portrays the pervasive presence of criminality in US society, reminding us of how it has repeatedly deprived people of property and stripped them of their agency. Thus, *GTA V* illustrates the formation and assertion of American national agency, and it simultaneously foregrounds its inherent illegitimacy.

NOTES

¹ Mahshid Mayar and Stefan Schubert, "The Joystick in the Garden: Video Games, American Studies, and Politics," *The European Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 3 (2021): 2, 4.

² Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski, "Introduction: American Game Studies," *American Literature* 94, no. 1 (2022): 3.

³ Daichi Nakagawa, *Gendai game zenshi: bunmei no yuugishikan kara* [The modern history of video games: the ludic perspective of civilization] (Tokyo: Hayakawashobou, 2016), 34–40.

⁴ Jordan Sirani, "The 10 Best-Selling Video Games of All Time," IGN, accessed August 15, 2024, <https://www.ign.com/articles/best-selling-video-games-of-all-time-grand-theft-auto-minecraft-tetris>. According to this ranking, *GTA V* is the best-selling console/PC-only game. *GTA V* is available on PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, and PC. Rockstar Games or its holding company, Take-Two Interactive, does not officially release the detailed demographic data of *GTA V* players. However, a 2023 report by Entertainment Software Association indicates that the average age of video game players in the United States is thirty-two, with fifty-three percent identified as male and forty-six as female, and seventy-two percent identified as white. As for the more detailed information about game players in the United States, see "2023 Essential Facts about the U.S. Video Game Industry," Entertainment Software Association, accessed August 15, 2024, <https://www.theesa.com/resources/essential-facts-about-the-us-video-game-industry/2023-2/>.

⁵ In December 2023, Rockstar North released a trailer of *Grand Theft Auto VI* and announced its release in 2025, which the company later delayed until May 2026.

⁶ Keith Stuart, "Grand Theft Auto 5: Rockstar's Dan Houser on Los Santos and the Future," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/17/grand-theft-auto-5-gta-dan-houser-interview>.

⁷ Matt Hill, "Grand Theft Auto V: Meet Dan Houser, Architect of a Gaming

Phenomenon,” *The Guardian*, September 7, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/07/grand-theft-auto-dan-houser>.

⁸ Nate Garrelts, “An Introduction to Grand Theft Auto Studies,” in *Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 3.

⁹ John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 171.

¹⁰ As for the satirical aspect of the *GTA* series, see Paul Christopher, *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design, and Play* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 92. Regarding the failure of the American capitalist dream depicted in *GTA V*, see John Wills, “‘Ain’t the American Dream Grand’: Satirical Play in Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto V*,” *The European Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 3 (2021): 5, 10. Also see Dominique Fontaine, “Landscape in Computer Games: The Examples of *GTA V* and *Watch Dogs 2*,” in *Modern Approaches to the Visualization of Landscapes*, ed. Dennis Edler, Corinna Jenal, and Olaf Kühne (Wiesbaden; Springer VS, 2020), 299. As for subversive aspects of *GTA V*, see Kyle Moody, “The End of the Dream: How *Grand Theft Auto V* Simulates and Subverts Its Male Player-Character Dynamics,” in *Masculinities in Play*, ed. Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), 61–63. Connecting the norm of capitalist accumulation to identity politics, Moody argues that *GTA V* tries to challenge the American traditional norms of being rich and being manly.

¹¹ Moody points out a performative aspect and argues that players help shape the masculine identities of the playable characters through gameplay. However, Moody’s focus is more on the assertion of masculinity in *GTA V* rather than on its interactive nature. See Moody, “The End of the Dream: How *Grand Theft Auto V* Simulates and Subverts Its Male Player-Character Dynamics,” 57. Meanwhile, Marcus Maloney discusses the intentional reduction of interactivity in a torture scene where players can do nothing but be “[p]laced in ‘control’ of the deranged avatar [Trevor],” which reduces their agency to a minimum; see Marcus Maloney, “Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design,” *Games and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2019): 40. As for interactivity in video games in general, see Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 147–50.

¹² Basically, every player experiences the same main story missions, with small variations in a few missions and differences in the ending. All the missions referred to in this paper are included in these main story missions, and therefore, they are replayable. Regarding the differences in the ending, *GTA V* has three different endings, labeled A, B, and C. In each ending, Franklin is the only playable character and players are given three choices for how they are going to progress in the story thereafter: A is to kill Trevor, who is considered too dangerous by the FIB; B is to kill Michael in favor of Devin Weston, a billionaire who holds a grudge against him; and C is to refuse both A and B, and instead, tell Michael and Trevor everything, and cooperate with them to save themselves and kill all the people who are against them.

¹³ Rockstar North, *Grand Theft Auto V*, Rockstar Games, 2013.

¹⁴ Matt Bertz, “Go Big or Go Home,” *Game Informer* 236 (2012): 76; Hill, “*Grand Theft Auto V*: Meet Dan Houser, Architect of a Gaming Phenomenon.”

¹⁵ Sam Sweet, “Idling in Los Santos,” *New Yorker*, September 20, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/idling-in-los-santos>.

¹⁶ Stuart, “*Grand Theft Auto 5*: Rockstar’s Dan Houser on Los Santos and the Future.” Houser says that the map of *GTA V* represents “a twentieth” of the actual size of the city that they want to recreate in it.

¹⁷ Sweet, “Idling in Los Santos.”

¹⁸ Bertz, "Go Big or Go Home," 90.

¹⁹ Sweet, "Idling in Los Santos."

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 42–43. See also Edward W. Soja, *The Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), 243–44.

²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2010), 28, 57–58. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 13–58.

²² Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum, "Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice City," in *Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 170.

²³ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 17–23.

²⁴ Soja, *The Postmodern Geographies*, 190–91.

²⁵ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 18.

²⁶ Zack Whalen, "Cruising in San Andreas: Ludic Space and Urban Aesthetics in *Grand Theft Auto*," in *Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 158. Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 130. Regarding hidden criminality in everyday life, also see Fredric Jameson, "On Raymond Chandler," in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*, ed. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 124–26.

²⁷ Jameson, "On Ramond Chandler," 130.

²⁸ Wills, *Gamer Nation*, 170, 173.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

³⁰ Christopher, *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design, and Play*, 97. In his analysis of *GTA IV*, Christopher observes that "the characters in *GTA* can do bad things because they are not us. They are people in a world similar to ours, but different enough that players are not encouraged to think too much about the relationships between the world represented in the game and the world that exists outside of it."

³¹ Fontaine, "Landscape in Computer Games: The Examples of *GTA V* and *Watch Dogs 2*," 299.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Whalen "Cruising in San Andreas: Ludic Space and Urban Aesthetics in *Grand Theft Auto*," 147.

³⁴ Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*, 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 150–51.

³⁶ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1.

³⁷ Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*, 151.

³⁸ Mark J. P. Wolf, "Space in the Video Game," in *The Medium of the Video Game*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 67–68.

³⁹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 251.

⁴⁰ Carolyn Petit, "Grand Theft Auto V Review," *Game Spot*, September 17, 2013, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/grand-theft-auto-v-review/1900-6414475/>.

⁴¹ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 2008), 127–28.

⁴² Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 126, 136–37.

⁴³ Fontaine "Landscape in Computer Games: The Examples of *GTA V* and *Watch Dogs 2*,"

303.

⁴⁴ Greg Singh, “*San Andreas*: Agency, Movement, and Containment; or How the West is (Frequently) Won,” *The Aesthetics of Play*, October 14–15, 2005, <https://www.aestheticsofplay.org/papers/singh2.htm>.

⁴⁵ Gonzalo Frasca, “Sim Sin City: Some Thoughts about *Grand Theft Auto 3*,” *Game Studies* 3, no. 3 (2003): 4–5; Maloney, “Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design,” 39. Maloney argues that there is not necessarily anything to play except for antisocial acts in *GTA V* and “socially acceptable activities are not as engaging as the antisocial ones.” Regarding the theme of communication in the *GTA* series, also see Marc Ouellette, “Removing the Checks and Balances that Hamper Democracy: Play and the Counter-hegemonic Contradictions of *Grand Theft Auto IV*,” *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4, no. 2 (2010): 202. Ouellette argues that in-game human relationships in *Grand Theft Auto IV* rely on lucrativeness, that is, whether they “can lead to money and other rewards, including fast cars, helicopters, weapons, safe houses, and more job opportunities.”

⁴⁶ Moody, “The End of the Dream: How *Grand Theft Auto V* Simulates and Subverts Its Male Player-Character Dynamics,” 61.

⁴⁷ Maloney, “Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design,” 40.

⁴⁸ Wills, “‘Ain’t the American Dream Grand’: Satirical Play in Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto V*,” 5.

⁴⁹ Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Wills, “‘Ain’t the American Dream Grand’: Satirical Play in Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto V*,” 8.

⁵³ Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Maloney, “Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design,” 39.

⁵⁶ Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V*.

⁵⁷ Stuart, “*Grand Theft Auto 5*: Rockstar’s Dan Houser on Los Santos and the Future.” The next sequel in the series, *Grand Theft Auto VI*, which Rockstar has announced will be released in 2026, features Lucia, the first female protagonist in the series.

⁵⁸ Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Maloney, “Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design,” 41.

⁶¹ Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V*.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Singh, “*San Andreas*: Agency, Movement, and Containment; or How the West is (Frequently) Won.”

⁶⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 4–5.

⁶⁵ Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 91.