The Practice of Playing Video Games: Exploring the Politics in Grand Theft Auto 5

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Video Games have become one of the largest entertainment products in the world. While a seemingly indiscriminate leisure-based activity, the act of playing a video game and the content within them have implications for meaning making in the 21st century. How we understand ourselves and our relations to the world around us can be informed by everyday activities like video games. I explore this topic by examining Grand Theft Auto Five's complicated engagement with politics. How does the content of Grand Theft Auto Five engage the user with American political life through an immersion in a large open-world format? How does the act of playing Grand Theft Auto Five allow the user to immerse themselves in an alternative space where they generate meaning and conceptions of self? A multivariate analysis demonstrates that this game places the user in a complex relationship with a virtual world that reflects reality. This is one where politics are explicitly evident and implicitly hidden.

Introduction

Video games were not always an activity conveniently played from the home. Some might recall a time when video games required one to travel to an arcade, when video game machines were not so highly accessible. Today, gaming might be considered a nearly ubiquitous everyday activity given their presence in variety of mobile and stationary devices. While video games have become commonplace in many peoples everyday lives, this medium presents an array of unique questions, problems and inquiries that have yet to be studied. Many of these questions have important implications for politics at large and political theory in specific, but have not drawn significant attention from either. They are able to hide from the realm of politics because they appear as an indiscriminate part of our everyday routines, one that appears to separate ourselves from the stresses of work or family. While games can certainly have this effect, it is only when we push against a ubiquitous notion of "games as pure leisure" that political theorist can unravel the complex worlds where pixels are informing politics.

The basic premise of this project is to pose video games as cultural objects that are worthy of scholarly and political study. I evaluate *Grand Theft Auto 5* (GTA 5) through the lens of the politics of everyday life as one case among many potential cultural objects. This is achieved through an interdisciplinary approach that binds scholars of everyday life with others who study video games in various academic contexts. As will be seen below, scholars of everyday life are of central importance to my work, but they do not provide an adequate structure to account for how our lives and politics have changed in late-modernity. Meaning making at the level of the everyday has and continues to go through tremendous change in the United States in correlation with the boom in electronic technology. For instance, neoliberalism has generated

new mechanisms that inform our political beliefs and the ways that we relate with an increasingly monetized world. There currently exist a void between past scholars of everyday life and present scholars of video games that does not make the connections between large political shifts and changes in meaning making through activities like games.

Among many others, Henry Lefebvre provides a useful framework to understand how meaning making has been transformed in the text *Critique of Everyday Life.* Making my premise more explicit, our forms of meaning making are disrupted by our alienation from our work and from those around us. Lefebvre writes "For us, in our society, with the forms of exchange and the division of labor which govern it, there is no social relation- relation with the other - without a certain alienation".[1] In addition to our alienation, we operate in our everyday lives as occupying particular roles to create relations with those around us. Our meaning is created by the roles we either embrace as the self, or the roles we believe are separate from ourselves. That is, the difference between being your job and playing out your job - I am a construction worker or I play the role of construction worker. Lefebvere draws our attention to the complex relationship between our everyday activities and our leisure actives. Everyday activities can be leisure activities, and an activity implies an everyday activity- but not all everyday activities can be leisure activities.[2] These relationships can be parsed out elsewhere, but it is important for describing the sort of void that is growing in how we relate to the world around us. We are now constructing a particular relationship with the world because of our alienation from work, self, and everyday activities.

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[1] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2014) 37
[2] Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life,* 54.

Keeping Lefebvre framing of everyday activities in mind, we can begin to see how politics are expressed in an everyday activity like video games. *Critique of Everday Life* is particularly useful because it addresses the multiplicity of political experiences that take place in our lives. In video games, we can see two different potentialities for politics: the act of playing the game and the politics/substance within the game. While it may seem obvious, the later simply suggest that we acknowledge the overtly political commentary found in many video games. Similar to film, *Paranormal Activity* may beacon to our base interest in suspense, while others engage us in existential phenomenon, such as *2001 a Space Odyssey*.[34] Simply, not all games are meant to engage us with politics, but it is clear that some do. Addressing the former premise, scholars need to pay particular attention to the uniqueness of playing a video game as apposed to other everyday activities. Video games present wholistic environments for the user to interact with. As such, if a substantial portion of a games environment is engaged in a way that comments or satirizes a real environment, then the player is at some level engaged with politics at the level of the everyday. With these basic parameters I wish to show the ways that GTA 5 engages and reflects modern politics through an activity that is done between the significant portions of our daily lives.

In addition to this premise, I operate under the assumption that GTA 5 has no single mechanic that makes it appealing to the consumer. That is, some games have exceptional combat mechanics, shooting mechanics, driving etc. GTA 5 does none of these mechanics exceptionally well. That is, if a player wants to play a driving game, they can play *Forza*.[5] If a player wants to

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[3] *Paranormal Activity,* directed by Oren Peli (Blumhouse Productions, 2000) (2012).
[4] *2001 A Space Odyssey,* directed by Stanley Kubrick (Stanley Kubrick Productions, 1964) (1968).
[5] *Forza 4 Horizon* (Playground Games, 2010), Video Game (2018).

play a combat oriented game, they can play *Mortal Kombat*.[6] GTA 5's standout feature is twofold. First, GTA 5 reconciles a variety of game mechanics not combined in many other games. What allows for this unification is the second feature, which is the open world format and complex game world. GTA 5 is unique given the mass expanse of the environment which is reflective of modern day Los Angeles. These are the two qualities that also engage the player with politics in this seemingly typical everyday activity. As will be reflected below, it is impossible to play GTA 5 and not be engaged with a satirical reflection of American culture. Furthermore, the sandbox style of GTA 5 gives the player a degree of freedom over their everyday experience as apposed to the strict rules and mechanics imposed by many other games. I argue that the user is able to leave the gaze of the producer, as GTA 5s most profound limits come through its physics and loose borders on the game map.

Each of the premises and assumptions will be parsed out throughout the text. Their might be many scholars or video game players who approach this work with a strong skepticism, questioning why these premises and assumptions are important in the first place. This work is another case for studying the ordinary, viewing those things that seem unimportant as meaningful. Video games are one such cultural commodity that can be used to better understand how meaning making is shifting and how politics appear in ordinary moments. Video games have depth like a movie or television show, but they also have an additional layer of experiential value through the increase in the user's input. Not all games reflect this well, but GTA 5 has constructed a satirical and critical environment, while giving near full autonomy to the consumer to engage with the world of Los Santos (fictionalized Los Angeles). GTA 5 was not only

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[6] *Mortal Kombat 10* (NetherRealm Studios, 2010) Video Game (2015).

unprecedented in sales, but is unprecedented as a commodity that allows for such high engagement for the consumer.[7] Just as previous political philosophers have concerned themselves with everyday activities like cooking, cleaning, socializing and many others, I look to build on this scholarship posing the unique role of video games in everyday life.

Literature Review

For many scholars of algorithmic culture, it has been a temptation and a battle to combine the study of video games with film studies. We study films for both their artistic form and their societal implications. In this regard, I have found that many of the methodologies of film studies are applicable to the study of video games. This new medium has a similar utility as film studies and my analysis of GTA 5 is akin to analyzing *Hoop Dreams*.[8] This is not, however, the perspective of some scholars. In Alexander R. Galloway's book, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, he fundamentally disagrees with this disposition. He establishes that "...photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions".[9] The defining feature of a game is that the user interacts with the images on the screen, rather than merely being witness to them as in a film. Further, the subject and the computer are in a mutual action by which the computer runs software and the subject relates directions. The subject and the machine interaction is vital to that which makes video games unique to other culture mediums. In the case of a movie theater, a projector displays the film on a screen, but we have no relationship to the

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[7] Jeff Grub "Grand Theft Auto V is just 5 million copies away from 100 million in sales" Venture Beat, May 16th, 2018, accessed December 6, 2018.

[8] *Hoop Dreams,* directed by Steve James (Kartemquin Films, 1994), accessed February 6, 2019.

[9] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

projector, no impact on what it shows us, or often any awareness that it exists. We witness the film. The fundamental difference between the computer and the subject is mostly negligible. The subject enters an input to the computer, and the computer generates out an input for the subject to engage with.[10] That is, it is impossible for the subject to ignore the computer given the existence of peripherals that allow the subject to engage with the actions on the screen. Watching a movie is a physically passive act, whereas a game is an inherently active physical experience. This has important implications for how the act of playing a game is political not as a movie, but different from watching a movie (or other cultural mediums). The user is given an environment to interact with and engages in a relationship with the computer (or console) by which the player makes decisions that engage with politics.

While *Essay on Algorithmic Culture* was published in the era of Grand Theft Auto 3, it establishes many important premises for how GTA 5 should be understood. A central claim of my work is that analyzing the structure of the map in GTA 5 reveals a commentary on the plight of modern American cities and culture. One might believe that my argument presumes too much and that the space is inconsequential, designed for the user's fun. Galloway makes an important distinction between these spaces depicted in films and depicted in video games. Film makers do not work in absolute space, rather in a built incantation of the real world space they would like to capture. This pertains heavily to set design, but even in the case of a film that captures a real world environment, the viewer is restricted by what the filmmakers deems important to them.[11] A video game requires a fully developed space that gives the player the autonomy to explore. Of

[10] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 5.
[11] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7.

course, the game designers restrict the space through their decisions as to world design, but they

almost always give the player a degree of freedom as to how to interact with the world. While

Galloway has a more ambitious idea as to video games unique nature, I conjure that the game

developers decisions as to how and where the player can interact with the world are what is

revealing in a game like GTA 5. Just like the director, game developers make a conscious

decision to divide a map in a particular form. The interactions that the player chooses to have

reinforce the societal reflection.[12] The most important connection between Galloway's work and

my work is his discussion of realism in games. Galloway believes that finding social realism in a

game requires looking at the way the game critiques something indicative of society. As

Galloway observes, Rockstar Games has a history with social realism, which is clear in the game

State of Emergency. I make this point clear in my analysis below, but my evidence is supported

by Galloway's claim about the implications of space in games.

There have been a variety of scholarly works done on the early Grand Theft Auto Games,

but little to nothing on the recent to the iteration of the series. A book titled *The Meaning and*

Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays explores all of the Grand Theft Auto games up to

GTA 3. This work is particularly valuable as it is a compilation of essays done on the game

series. While each essay is not directly about politics, the discussions of culture bring in political

concepts that I engage with in this paper. The first set of essays in this collection connect the

mindset of the developers and their decisions to include contemporary motifs about the real

world. It is also helpful as some of these essays seek to explore the role of satire in the GTA

series.[13] The satire in the early GTA games are similar to that of GTA 5, however I strong

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[12] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, 76.

[13] Nate Garrelts, *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006).

argument could be made that GTA 5 has the most overtly satirical political commentary. While Nate Garrelts text does not have profound implications on a study of GTA 5, it is one of the sole texts that analyzes the series for its politics and social commentary.

Moving away from Garllets specific insights, the article titled *"Videology: Video-Games as Postmodern Sites/Sights of Ideological Reproduction"* by Simon Gottschalk uses a postmodernist approach to view video games as a cultural commodity.[14] The author presents some of the ideological elements that are integrated into video games.[15] Similar to the work in my research, this author is advocating for scholarly work that does not only view video games as a source of entertainment. Rather, the author argues that video games are a reflection of individuals in society. If video games are a reflection of individuals, then we should evaluate the entire game for its content. This work also analyses the psychological study of video games and why people enjoy playing them. Gottschalk discusses how video games provide a feeling of escape, and how a unique connection people develop with the act of playing a video game. While interesting, what is most important about this work is its avocation for studying video games as a cultural object to provide legitimacy to project like the present one.

Method of Analysis and Data Collection

The GTA 5 game world is a fictional rendition of contemporary Los Angeles, USA. From the storylines of the three characters you play to the radio stations you listen to in your car, the player's experience is in constant contact with critiques of modern culture as they relate to a large metropolitan city. I conducted a content analysis in an effort to capture the reflection and satire

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[14] Simon Gottschalk . "Videology: Video-Games as Postmodern Sites/Sights of Ideological Reproduction." *Symbolic Interaction* 18, no. 1 (1995): 3.
[15] Gottschalk *"Videology"* 4.

of Los Santos.[16] Data was collected by traveling through the game by taking notes, pictures and videos. Having collected massive amounts of data from traversing through the city, I then pierced together various dissociated elements to consider how these work to build a cohesive political experience.[17] After this process, the book references two specific ways to analyze visual material: analyzing collaboratively and analyzing evocation. As such, my method of analysis treats GTA 5 as a cultural commodity.[18] This allowed my data collection to embrace the flexibility of a players experience, considering the game world is not stagnant, but one that changes according to the players experience with, and within it.

In addition to my general method of analysis described above, I use the two books to ground my study of the game world: *Fundamentals of Game Design: Third Edition* and *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. These two serve as more specific guides to understanding and discussing the data that I have gathered from GTA 5. Reconciling these works with the political works from my literature review allow for a more wholistic view that consider the player and the developer. In *Fundamentals of Game Design* Ernest Adams describes the different types of immersion that game developers use to engage the player. These categories are: tactical immersion, static immersion, spatial immersion and narrative immersion. While GTA 5 involves all of these types, my data collection strictly focuses on spatial and narrative immersion. Adams contends "Spatial immersion is the sense of being in a place other than the one you're actually in". As for narrative immersion he says it is" ...the feeling of being inside a story; the player is completely involved and accepts the world and events of the story as real".[19] Adams makes

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[16] Johnny Saldana and Matt Omasta, *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life*(Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2017).

[17] Saldana and Omasta, *Qualitative Research,* 81.

[18] Saldana and Omasta, *Qualitative Research,* 85.

[19] Ernest Addams, *Fundamentals of Game Design: Third Edition* (New York, NY: Pearson Education, 2014), 21.

another important contribution to my data collection. He argues that the game designer is the "god" of the world that they create. As such, many games must establish the morality of the world, that is, the moral decisions and conundrums that the player engages with. I use this method to look for times within the storyline where the game developers engage the player with a moral decision. In addition, I use the analysis of the spatial immersion with Adams argument on ethical dimension to break down the ethical implications of GTA 5s map structure.[20]

With this general method in mind, I divide my analysis of GTA 5 into three distinct categories. First, I engage in a discussion of meta-political concepts and their connections to GTA 5 by engaging with various philosophers and political theorists. Then, I conduct a general discussion of the design of Los Santos that includes data taken from a variety of areas in the game. I evaluate the exterior of stores, the NPCs who work in the stores, the NPCs on the streets and NPCs in their residencies (NPC refers to Non-Player Character). I divide my data collection by two geographical sections of the city. The two most distinct parts of the city are loosely divided by North and South. After presenting the data for these two sections of the city, I compare them and discuss how these divisions are a critique of modernity and are inherently political. In addition, I analysis the central character Franklin. I evaluate his general storyline as a political critique of modernity. To present data from his story, I discuss a primary game quests where he rescues one of his friends from his childhood. Finally, this paper presents an overview of the state of GTA 5's online communities. This discussion includes Rockstar Games integrated online mode, as well as third-party role-play servers. Taken all together, this methodology seeks to provide a compressive view on the politics of playing GTA 5.

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[20] Addams, *Fundamentals of Game Design,* 159.

Video Games as Meaning Making (Meta-Poltical)

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* gives important insights to studying video games as an everyday activity. Certeau argues that marginality no longer applies to just minority groups, rather that marginality is becoming universalized by virtue of the producer-consumer relationship.[21] This book does not deal with all everyday activities, rather the "antidiciplines" which are products used in ways unintended by the producer. Given that the uses of these products beyond their intent lack traditional constraints, Certeau wants to study the new rules and ways of usage by consumers. Certaue does not want to focus on the intent given by the producers and openly goes to lengths to avoid doing so. A central aspect of Certeau's analysis is his focus on strategies and tactics. A strategy is "the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment". A tactic is "....A calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a social or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality". Keeping these two definitions in mind, Certaue also introduces the idea of "making do". Individuals can use a series of tactics that breaks down the division between work and leisure. The idea of "making do" is important because Certeau uses it to describe ways of operating within everyday life. People who are given a space have the capacity to shape and conform it to their own comfort, ignoring the systematized logics that otherwise constrain everyday life. Certeau writes "Thus, once the images broadcast by television and the time spent in front of the TV set have been analyzed, it remains to be asked what the

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[21] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles. CA: University of California Press, 1984) xv.

consumer makes of these images during these hours".[22] Just as Certeau asks what people make while watching TV, I wish to explore what people make of the images that are produced by their game console or computer.

Michel de Certeau and two co-authors further outline a theory of everyday life in the book *"The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking"*. This book is not a study of the individual, rather a study of "modes of operation". Studying modes of operations allows Certeau to construct an operational combination that focuses on the user's actions. Everyday life is constructed by the ways oppressed and cooperation dominated consumers manipulate products. Studying representations should be combined with a study of what consumers of culture do with products. A bottom-up approach tells more about a product than an evaluation of what elites tell us about a product. As discussed above, it appears that Certeau is studying a marginal group, however, the marginality now applies nearly universally. Despite marginalities new universality, this group remains a "silent majority".[23] This group of consumers operate on an unpredictable trajectory that only appears to be clear because of the use of language. Consumers trajectories are unpredictable because everyday actions exemplify a more deep interest or desire that cannot be achieved within the prevailing system.[24] Consumers activate control over this system through what Certeau describes as a strategy which was defined above. Like a strategy, he continues that a tactic does not rely on space, rather is dependent on time. A tactic can only momentarily occupy a space, looking to take advantage of opportunities where they present

[22] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles. CA: University of California Press, 1984) 1.
[23] Michel De Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living and Cooking,* trans. Timothy J Tomasik (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)*,* xvii.
[24] Michel De Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living and Cooking,* trans. Timothy J Tomasik (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xviii.

themselves. Heterogeneous opportunities to reconcile everyday consumption with a more complex usage of the products. Everyday activities are more unique than other activities as they are inherently tactical.[25] This study is fundamentally about how consumers use products and space to tactically manipulate everyday life to be more enjoyable.[26]

Grand Theft Auto 5 illuminates many elements of Certeau's theory. The open sandbox style allows the consumer to operate outside of the gaze of the producer, enabling the user to interact with the virtual world to their liking. Notably, loading into GTA 5 does not immerse you in a story immediately, rather placing you into the open world and allowing you to choose your next interaction. The consumer is not alienated from their interaction so much as they are provided with the freedom to interact within the world created by the producer. The consumer is provided with the tactics to assume control over the product within the virtual space. The primary constraint is the actual world and the physics that accompany it. That is, GTA 5 constantly maintains a play option that allows the consumer to act independently of the producer. An example will help illuminate this point. Take a Call of Duty game, say Black Ops 2.[27] This game has three primary modes: Campaign, Multiplayer and Zombies. Each of these modes has clear rules that extend beyond basic map constraints and physics. There are complex and unique rules in multiplayer and zombies that are not found while travelling around the world of GTA 5. These two modes have objectives, point scoring systems and rules as to team interactions. In the campaign, the only autonomy or separation that consumer has from the producer is movement within a specified mission. Contrary, Rockstar Games act as a producer that gives a great deal of

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[25]Certeau, Giard and Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2,* xix.

[26] Certeau, Giard and Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2,* xxii.

[27] Call of Duty Black Ops 2 (Activision, 1992), Video Game (2012)

autonomy to the consumer to move and play in the world. If Certeau was concerned with the producer maintaining a gaze on the consumer, then GTA 5 purposefully cast aside this level of control. When playing outside the central story, the subject is free to engage with the world in whatever way they choose with virtually no restraints. Infact, GTA 5 includes a set of cheat codes that allow players to manipulate the basic rules of the world for their own enjoyment. This both complicates and suites Certeaue's discussion of the producer consumer relationship.

As mentioned above GTA 5 is among the few contemporary Triple A games that allows the player to enter cheat codes by putting in a combination to a controller. You can become invisible, spawn a weapon or make your bullets explode. The user gets to assert more control over the open world through a mechanic included by the developers. While many enjoy the game as the producers intended, the way some choose to interact with this everyday activity represents the heterogeneous ways that consumers modify their interaction with the product. By applying modifications to the game, consumers are able to separate the producers from their realm, thereby taking control of the space of everyday life. Modifying the game allows consumers to interact with the product as they would like rather than as is prescribed to them. Further, an open world game like GTA 5, that is one that simulates many aspects of everyday life, has given people the opportunity to create a world in their image that is not attainable in the work or family world. I am hesitant to speak thoroughly on this topic, as my knowledge of computer programming is limited, which is a key contingency for fully understanding game modification. Despite this, modifications in GTA 5 role-play fits within the type of manipulation to products that Certeau wrote about. Modifications seem to have two distinct realms- those who produce them and those who use them. Thus, the person who modifies the game certainly is engaged in

the type of act that interested Certeau- that is consumers who change and make a product

independent to its original use as specified by a producer.[28] But this role is made complicated by

virtue of the manipulation a consumer has, a skill that becomes valuable to consumers who wish

to manipulate their product but lack the necessary skills. The manipulating consumer becomes a

proto producer, by which a group of people rely on their skills to further enjoy a game. What

makes this type of producer unique is that they almost never have a boss or corporation to

answer to, rather they are often more influenced by a like-minded community of programmers

and gamers. Thus, I argue that these proto-producers should maintain the role of the consumer

that Certeau was interested in. With all these contingencies and complications, the framework

that Certeau established in his two volumes of The Practice of Everyday Life are key to my

research.

It is at this moment that a scholar on video games helps to supplement Certeau's

discussion. A chapter in the book *Contemporary Culture: New Directions in Art and Humanities*

Research Renee van de Vall discusses the consumer-producer paradigm in digital games. Vall

emphasizes the idea of interactivity in new media, which he argues is indicative of a larger

change and transition from traditional forms of media like movies, television or reading. Video

games take the typical imaginative interactive elements of the above mediums and give the

subject an extra level of input that increases interactiveness. Vall's claim is that the increase in

interactivity has been a primary contributor to the breakdown of the division between the

producer and the consumer. Unlike movies or television, producers have an increased level of

involvement in game development. Vall recognizes that this relationship is complicated, as there

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[28] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984)

are still clear boundaries between producers and consumers. Vall does not address the important

technological point that games are a unique medium in their ability to be changed after their

release. Movies, books and television are more stagnant in their ability to be changed after

something has been released to theatres, a season has been shot or a book has been published.

Today, video games can be changed on a bi-weekly basis according to the relationship of the

game developer to a gaming platform. If users are unhappy with a game, then enough outcry can

lead to changes in the game. This is the type of merging between the producer and consumer that

Vall wants to emphasize.[29]

For all that is useful about the two texts above, their time of publication do not allow for

important connections to be made to changes in 21st century everyday life. Wendy Brown's

Undoing the Demos is a useful text to see the ways that GTA 5 operates within and outside of

neoliberalism as an everyday activity. This connection is useful, as neoliberalism takes rise in the

1970s, while the game industry saw tremendous growth in the 1980s. Brown argues that

neoliberalism asserts "unethical commercialization" to spaces that are not meant to operate under

market values. These values bolster exploitation and degrade spaces that were otherwise separate

from the market.[30] Brown illuminates this point by noting how everyday spaces can be

economized, despite the fact that they do not need to be. These spaces are fundamentally

transformed because the knowledge they generate is dictated by economic logics. That is, a

particular activity may have its own set of inherent logics, but these are circumvented by the

logics of economy. Brown makes the important observation that not every sphere is wholly

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[29] Judith Thissen, Robert Zwijnenberg, and Kitty Zijlmans, *Contemporary Culture: New Directions in Art and Humanities Research* (Amsterdam, NL:Amsterdam University Press, 2013).
http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wp6n0.
[30] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books) 29.

infected by economization, but that these logics are "...disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities- …".[31] This theory has importance at both at the meta-politcal level, but also at the level of the everyday because of the perverse nature of neoliberalisms logics.

Brown gives examples of these logic applications in everyday life, but video games may be one of the most exemplary demonstrations. As mentioned above, GTA 5 sits behind a 60$ pay wall, in addition to the hardware required to play the game. It could be argued that the actual price of the game is not evidence of an inappropriate application of the logic of the market. Perhaps a better place to look is transactions included within the game. If one buys the game solely for the story mode, then it appears that the logics of the market are not disseminated to the user. There are not things within the story mode that can be bought with real money. The story-mode does include a fictionalized economy where the user can buy cars, clothing and guns, all of which is acquired through missions in the game. The question then becomes, is the fictionalized in-game economy an example of the inappropriate dissemination of market values? The money gathered in the game is arguably second hand to the gameplay and missions. That is, you play a mission and receive money as a consequence, as most missions are not worth playing for the reward. In a RPG (Role Play Game) it is more often the case that a game is played for the reward, which I do not believe is the case in GTA 5. Furthermore, any standard play through of GTA 5 will give the player enough money to buy almost any item by the end of the story mode. While there is a fictional economy, it does not seem to fit within the model of neoliberalism that Brown describes. There is, however, another component to the game that exemplifies Browns understanding of neoliberalism.

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[31] Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 31.

What I have been reluctant to discuss in this paper in GTA 5 Online, but it is crucial to at least mention in relation to Brown's theory of neoliberalism. GTA 5 Online is a mode where the user gets to use their own character to interact with other real players. The online mode is set on the same map, includes NPC's and some of the same characters from the story mode. Outside of these constraints, the online mode is a chaotic space of user interaction. It would take pages to describe all of the editions and modes included in the online version. What is important about all of them is that they are typically sitting behind a paywall. The online economy is not so much fictional, as the user can use real money to acquire in-game money. While money can be collected solely through GTA 5 Online, the prices of items are so high that it would take many days to acquire most items in the game. New updates allow the user to purchase cars, military vehicles, aircrafts and many other items. Further, the activities that are available to the user occupy a strange place of intense participation in an online market. Missions allow you to become a boss of your own company, moving various goods and conducting missions for money to buy other items. The important point is that missions are not done for the interaction with NPCs or to continue a story, but solely to acquire funds to purchase other items. The economization of GTA 5 Online is clear, especially when juxtaposed to the story mode.

There exists a strange dichotomy between the two distinct modes in GTA 5. On the one hand, Certaue theory of the producer-consumer relationship demonstrates that GTA 5 story mode gives a great deal of autonomy to the player to interact in a game world outside of the producers gaze. On the other hand, Brown demonstrates that GTA 5 Online restricts the players' autonomy, not allowing them to leave the producers gaze. Rather, the player is forced to constantly leave the realm of the everyday as a location for politics, instead being immersed in a world of the market.

As the story mode and online communities are further explored below, we should keep these two theories in mind as ways to contemplate GTA 5 politics.

The Politics of Grand Theft Auto Five

One of the most important elements of GTA 5 game design is the division of the game world. In general, the map is divided between the metropolitan section and the rural section, while more specific division exists within these general parameters. For the purposes of this research, the city will be the only area discussed. There are no easily identifiable divisions for the city, but there are major differences between the Northern part of Los Santos and the Southern part. These two sections of the city represent typical divisions in modern American cities. Each geographical division is its own unique critique of modern society. The general North/South divide allows the developers of GTA 5 to make a diverse set of critiques that range across socio-economic status. The Northern part of Los Santos is a critique of modern bourgeois culture. The cars, stores and houses are the most expensive and extravagant of any location in the game. The Northern region of the map begins with skyscrapers that serve as a business center of Los Santos. Located just behind the business center is a series of straight roads that make up the shopping areas. This area extends for a large portion of the map and slowly transitions into a residential area. Similar to the Hollywood Hills, the houses in North of Los Santos are on a steep hill. All the houses are large mansions with pools, balconies, and multi-car garages.

There are two unique stores in the Northern part of Los Santos- Ponsonby's and Suburbia. They are located in the high-end shopping centers between the residential area and the business center. In Ponsonby's, the clothing is not particularly impressive, but the price for items

in the store ranges from $1,000 to $10,000. The stores clerk demeanor is pretentious towards any of the characters who enter the store. One of her primary voice lines is "you can't afford to shop where I work". If you bump into her she will say "The word is excuse me". When browsing the clothing she says "you won't find those anywhere else". The NPC's demeanor and primary voice lines combined with the expensive clothes give the store a pretentious aesthetic. Compared to Ponsboy, Suburbia is more of a young and hip store. The sign in the front has large bubbly font and the windows are covered with posters and stickers. The store is fairly typical, with a reasonably priced selection of clothing. The NPC in the store is particularly rude and passive towards those who enter the store. They have a multitude of voice lines for when you browse the store, such as "I really don't want to be here today" and "I really need a snack- all I have eaten today is romaine lettuce". The store clerk will also say "If you could make it quick, I was in the middle of a blog post" and "I wouldn't wear most of this myself, I have to admit". This NPC has a variety of other passive voice lines, but these exemplify of the general sentiment they have towards shoppers.

The NPCs roaming around Northern Los Santos are similar to the store clerks. Throughout the storefronts and residential areas characters of the middle-upper class recite stereotypical voice lines. To take data on these characters, I went to the residential area of Los Santos and listened in on conversations between NPCs. At one home, an older white women says "I'm starting to think there are no good butlers left in this town". Her daughter responds with a mumble and a shrug. Just next door, a middle-aged woman is standing in front of her giant, open-format mansion and says to her friend "you know it is insulting to be lumped in with the rest of the 1%". Just across the street, an African American man in his 30s is on the phone and

says "well, I was nearly in a gang- more than most people can say". These voice lines are both a

satire and a critique of modern upper-class people. Complaints about butlers and taking offense

to being included in the 1% reflect how the rich NPCs are ignorant of their privileged place in

society. In a fictional world of giant mansions in the best part of the city, even the NPCs find

something wrong with their current state. In one instance, being a wealthy African American

man seems to bring about anxiety in being an outsider from his own community. One of the

pinnacles of success in modern America is to amount wealth, but once this wealth is achieved,

life still presents a multitude of perceived issues. Further, the problems for the NPCs of Northern

Los Santos seem ludicrous compared to the homeless, the gang members or the workers of

Southern Los Santos. The game presents its rich populations as ignorant of larger issues through

their own inconveniences.

The Southern part of Los Santos is in stark contrast to the North but shares the same form

of satire and critique on modern culture. An interesting aspect of Southern Los Santos is that it

has fewer stores that the player can interact with. The unique stores in the Southern part of Los

Santos include a discount clothing store, carwash, and a strip club. The carwash has no NPCs to

talk with and the strip club voice dialogue is not appropriate or important for the research here.

Being said, data collected for Southern Los Santos includes the discount clothing store, a tattoo

shop (although found in the Northern part also) and a side quest exclusive to this area of the map.

Similar to data collected in Northern Los Santos, I will include dialogue from people on the

street and outside of their homes.

The discount clothing store and tattoo parlor critique and satirize a different aspect of

modern culture than the expensive stores from the North. Just like in Suburbia, there is a young

person working as the store clerk at Discount Clothing. Rather than being condescending, the store clerk is both shy and passive. When you enter the store she says "oh hi" as if she was surprised to have someone enter. If you bump into her she nervously states "what, oh sorry". Similarly, when browsing clothes she will say "uh, do you see anything you like?". Again, all of these voice lines are done in a nervous tone that is not encouraging you to buy clothes or interact with the NPC. In the tattoo parlor, the young man is annoyingly energetic and talkative. The tattoo artist brags about his mediocre talents by saying "I do mad good custom work". While browsing tattoos he will also say "I do gang stuff too, if ya need it". Both of these NPCs are critiques and reflections of younger people in lower income neighborhoods. The clerk at the discount store is shy and unsure of herself when speaking. She does not have much on an interest in selling clothes. The young man giving tattoos is barbose and insensitive with his voice lines. His demeanor makes him seem like he lacks self-reflection or care towards the tattoo.

Along with the interactions the player can have in the stores, there are also side missions that happen randomly when playing the game. One of the options as a player is to buy a taxi company that largely serves Southern Los Santos. As the owner of the taxi company, Franklin (a young African American man) receives a call saying that a client has requested to be picked up by Franklin himself. Upon arriving at the request, a white man in his 40s gets into the car. Franklin asks the man why he asked for him rather than one of the normal cab drivers. The man says that his niece has been gone with a young biker gang for many days and needs help to go bring her home. Franklin expresses skepticism but does not say much. As they get closer to the gang the man hands Franklin a gun and says it is just in case things go badly. Franklin shows his frustration and questions whether the man only asked for him because he is a young Black man

from Chamberlain Hills (a part of Southern Los Santos). The man nervously stumbles over himself, only to reveal that this was the motivation for his request. A shootout ensues and Franklin helps the client find his niece. It is vital that this mission happens while Franklin is in the Southern part of the city. The white man assumes Franklin is able and willing to help him have a shootout with a gang because of his race and where he grew up. The mission is built on a critique of the interactions between white people and their disposition towards African Americans from a certain region. Assumptions regarding young African American men's propensity towards violence has been a significant issue in American history. Assumptions about race from the public and from police have led to long-standing issues for African Americans.[32]

The characters who roam Southern Los Santos are indicative of the modern problem addressed in the mission above. Southern Los Santos can feel far more vibrant the Northern Los Santos in regard to the NPCs. On a street corner, there are two men drinking and sharing a cigarette when one says "I need to grab some of those Aries Classics" (a shoe in the game). While having this conversation you can hear a women yell "I am a proud Black woman". Moving just down the street to a residential area you can overhear members of Franklin's gang talking in a circle. One says "man I'm just out there maintaining my OG reputation". In this same group of people, one person commented on my player's car when saying "You flossin with those wheels". If you move a few blocks down from the residential area you come across a bridge with homeless people underneath. One elderly homeless person says "Them army benefits is bullshit" and another says "can you spare something for old women". For everything that the developers of GTA 5 criticized in Northern Los Santos, the people of Southern Los Santos long

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[32] Hinton, Hinton "'A War Within Our Own Boundaries': Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State," Journal of American History 102, no. 1 (June., 2015): 100-112.

for. While longing for the material wealth of North Los Santos, there is a sense that the people of Southern Los Santos are trapped in their lower socioeconomic status through the structure of the fictional cities' economy. The constant want for more material goods leads to Southern Los Santos being dominated by two rival gangs, which many NPCs are a part of to improve their material condition. It is this very conundrum that the central character Franklin finds himself in.

Franklin is one of three characters that the over thirty-hour campaign is centered around. This central character is a member of the "The Ballers", working to repo cars for a luxury car scam in Southern Los Santos. Franklin's story centers around his quest to desperately to build wealth and escape from Southern Los Santos, his former relationships and the gang life. Franklin is incredibly self-reflective and realizes the trap of the gang life and the economy of Southern Los Santos has created. There is no better mission that represents his struggle than the one titled "Lamar Down". Lamar Down takes place soon after Franklin moves from Southern Los Santos to a large house in the best part of Northern Los Santos. Soon after moving, his former girlfriend enters asking for help. It is important to note that Franklin's girlfriend left him because of his gang affiliation, in favor of a doctor with a steady job. Anyhow, his former girlfriend says Franklin's best friend Lamar needs help as he has been kidnapped by the rival gang. Franklin is frustrated that she expects him to help his friend who he views as a "fool". He says "He just another person from the hood, him Stretch and all those fools. All fucking clowns, all they want to do is drag a person down to the past". His former girlfriend responds by saying "so this is the future- a big empty house with no one who gives a fuck about you". Franklin is now clearly angry and says "My whole fucking life I've been looking after this motherfucker and paying the price afterward". Despite Franklin's frustrations, his friendship with Lamar and the arguments

from his former girlfriend compel him to help. What follows is fairly standard, as Franklin

rescues Lamar and defeats the rival gang. The two rejoice in their victory as they drive back into

the city. Upon returning to Southern Los Santos, Lamar says to Franklin "Man these the streets

dog, it's hard, maybe you forgot, with all this bettering yourself". Lamar then expresses a feeling

that he is trapped and says "man it the hood, it happens to everyone". Franklin responds by

saying "no it ain't". The tense conversation leads to the two going their separate ways.

While the gameplay in this mission follows a fairly typical construction, its backstory and

dialogue present a complicated picture of the lasting, prolonged and current effects of systemic

racism in the United States. This mission is not a simple "run and gun" activity where two

characters take down the bad guy. Rather, it reflects a capitalist economy that divided cities

through unequal funding and infrastructure to African American communities, segregation,

militarized policing, the Drug War, mass incarceration and many more.[33][34] Both in the opening

and closing dialogue, we see that Franklin is attempting to navigate the complex world of

Southern Los Santos that keep it members stuck in a cycle of crime and poverty. So while he

physically moves away from that environment to a large mansion, it is clear that there is no true

escape from the reaches of unequal capitalist structures, or from the racism that is embed into its

fabric. Both in mind and body, Franklin is constantly having to reconcile his "escape".

The Politics of Gaming Communities: GTA Role Play

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[33] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016).
[34] Michelle Alexander, "Introduction," in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Revised Edition (New York: The New Press, 2011).

While the discussion above focused on the players experience as dictated by the developers, GTA 5 role-play represents an example of the players everyday experience in a form that they dictate. Generally, GTA 5 role-play is when a group of players join a server and act as various characters. One of the most popular servers for GTA 5, particularly since January 2019 has been NoPixel. Most of the characters on NoPixel stream their gameplay on Twitch (a streaming platform) for a wide audience. To give context, Summit1G, a popular streamer, had 50,000 viewers throughout his GTA role-play stream.[35] Through the past two years GTA 5 has maintained its place in the top five streamed games on Twitch because of the NoPixel role-play server. To join the server you must submit what is said to be a lengthy application describing the character you want to play. While the official rules are not clear to the public, there are strenuous expectations as to behavior that make the server unique. These rules are in place to avoid some of the chaos of regular public GTA 5 servers. You must maintain character, always try to protect your life, you cannot take information from other streamers that you do not know in game etc. These rules can be the source of immense conflict, but are generally agreed upon by the players as important to maintain the role-play elements of the server. The politics in this sense are explicit, as everyone who joins the server agrees to a set of rules that cannot be coded into the game.While NoPixel is run by a group of developers who have coded and modified the game heavily, the rules that dictate interactions are vital for creating a role play space.[36] The rules and modifications work with one another to create a more realistic space. Given the rules established outside of the code and the changes modified into the code, the consumers of GTA 5 have manipulated the product and made it their own.

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[35] Summit1g "Stream" Twitch, accessed January 7, 2019.
[36] Koil "Stream" Twitch, acesseed August 11, 2019.

To return to Certeau, he was interested in the tactile nature of everyday activities whereby the ordinary person manipulates a product. While I hope to have established that the core of GTA 5 is political, this is doubled down by GTA 5 role-play and fits more precisely into the type of tactics that Certaeu describes. That is, Rockstar Games sells GTA 5 for $60 and millions of people buy that game as a consumer. Streamers like "Koil" have assumed a proto-producer role by which they are manipulating the core game in a fashion that Certeau described. As a computer programmer, the designers of NoPixel are integrated into a community of consumers but are similar to the producers at Rockstar for their computer expertise. The administrators of NoPixel have established a strenuous process to participate in their modified version of the original product. What is important is that this product may be limited in use, but is entirely free for people to consume as a viewer. This complicates the producer-consumer dichotomy that Certaeue describes and the essential nature of an added input that Galloway discussed. Thus, the hundreds of thousands of people who consume GTA 5 role-play have become removed from two essential elements of the political nature of GTA 5. The experience of traveling throughout the city of Los Santos is removed by watching a stream for the comedic, action or story oriented characters that exists on the server. In this regard, NoPixel and its viewers are further integrated into the producer-consumer dichotomy described by Certaue and removed from an important added input essential in playing a game.

These two steps of removal, however, do not make GTA 5 role play devoid of meaning or politics. The heavily modified server has developed its own culture and its own politics of play and engagement. The server has a few roles that must be on at anytime, which include medics, police and criminals. Not surprisingly, the politics of the interactions between police and

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criminals constitute a great deal of debate. The police have the most power on the server by virtue of their role as arbiters of justice. They also have the power to inflict force at their discretion, similar to police officers in real life. The police officers do serve the fictional purpose of maintaining peace, but their utility in the server is to ultimately be conducive to interesting interactions between themselves and the rest of the server. Thus, some police officers have been charged with "bad" or "fail" role-play in which they exerted force when it was not necessary or gave out jail sentences that were deemed too long. This is a contentious issue as the police on the server can shut down opportunities for meaningful interactions in favor of more realistic interactions. All of these charges can be similarly leveled against criminals who engage in action against the police in favor of their own experience. This conflict is indicative of the raging politics that takes place between the players and observers of the NoPixel server.

Furthermore, Browns theory of neoliberalism demonstrates unique debates within participants of the server. Money cannot be bought on NoPixel, rather is earned through jobs like being a police officer, medicine or tow truck driver. Many on the server play as criminals, robbing banks, selling drugs or distributing guns. Money is used to buy things like cars, guns, pay hospital bills or pay bail, but the way money is acquired is meant to allow for interaction between players. There have been debates on the server about how people who play to acquire money apposed to interaction take away from the experience. For instance, some streamers believe that robbing the in game bank should require a complex plan to create unique interactions between players. Those who quickly rob the bank without a plan are often criticized for prioritized their in game money over interactions. As such, we see that the unique online

community pushes back again the forces of neoliberalism that are present in GTA 5 Online in favor of a community based experience.

Michel de Certau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol devote a chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life: Volume 2* explicitly to what they call "the neighborhood". In many ways the politics that arise in NoPixel are more similar to the discussion that takes place in volume 2 than the discussion that Certeau established in the original volume of the book. The authors write "The city, in the strongest sense, is "poeticized" by the subject: the subject has re-fabricated it for his or her own use by undoing the constraints of the urban apparatus and, as consumer of space, imposes his or her own law on the external order of the city".[37] The coders of NoPixel have done what the authors describe in a more theoretical sense. These computer programmers have redesigned parts of the city and its rules to conform it to a setting that is conducive to the sixty or so players and the hundreds of thousands of viewers. They have used a tactic of manipulation to a product to exercise their own autonomy. In Certaue's framework, the very act of applying these tactics to the product is the political act that takes place at the level of the everyday. But Certaue's framework only takes us so far, as a new type of politics and a new form of the producer-consumer relationship develops. In this regard, GTA 5 role play is political in two forms, for the act of manipulating the game and the new relationships that develop between participants on the server.

Conclusion

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[37] Michel De Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol trans. Timothy J Tomasik, *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 13.

While I have attempted to present a more rigorous model for studying video games as cultural object that illuminates various aspects of politics and meaning making, this project is personal for me and many others. The very act of playing a video game, regardless of its substance, can be a form of escape, therapy, or relief from the "real world". Digital spaces have long been zones for those who do not satisfy some of the rigid political and social categorizations of contemporary American society. And while mainstream gaming culture has not and is still not a safe and accepting place, there are many subcultures that harbor meaningful communities for those who can not otherwise find them. Why these communities exist, how they exist and the people who occupy them are all political inquires. If we wish to discover more about politics in our digital age, we must do more to study video games as cultural objects, as I have attempted to do above.

The counter-argument that has lingered throughout my research is that of the cynical gamer. I believe that many might see this work as a reach and that playing GTA 5 is for the fun of driving cars and having comedic interactions with NPC's. To return to Adams book, he argued that a game designer must make the ethical dimension of their game clear to the user. This is a point that I want to and hope to have partially rejected in this work. The ethics of GTA 5 are not clear in the way that Adams describes, that is, a mission that gives the player a clear cut ethical dilemma. Rather the ambiguity in ethical goals is what makes GTA 5 such a strong game in its relationship to ethics and politics. Each of the central characters, namely Franklin are faced with ethical dilemmas that relate to complex political issues. For all the fun that can be had in GTA 5, the spatial and narrative immersion positions the player in constant relationship to political questions. These political questions appear at an important moment in the individual's

life. Micheal de Certeau was namely interested in the ordinary citizen and the ordinary activities

that they engaged with. If I could convince the cynical gamer that I am not overreaching, I hope

to have shown how video games fit within the framework of the politics of everyday life. This

argument is not profound, rather the acknowledgment that politics appear in seemingly mundane

aspects of life. Further, that GTA 5 is both one of the highest selling entertainment products of

all time and one of the best examples of politics within the modern everyday life. It fits a dual

relationship as in the producer paradigm of Certeau, the alienation to life and labor in Lefebre, or

to neoliberalism in Brown. But GTA 5 gives room within the game design to allow the consumer

to dissociate from the producer in a multitude of forms. This is not by accident, rather I hope to

have shown that this was a purposeful act.

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