“THE CHARACTER FEELS THAT WAY, NOT ME”: PLAYER DRIVEN NARRATIVE EXPERIENCES IN *GRAND THEFT AUTO IV*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the need for better understanding of player experiences of narrative, via a participant observation-focused case study of Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), an exemplary 'open world' action game. The project studies narrative as one multifaceted element of the game, drawing distinctions between what occurs within the central plot and what players make and take away from their experience.

The research is located at the intersection of studies of digital cultures, narrative theory, and the broad field of Game Studies. It adopts a theoretical framework influenced by the ethnographic work of researchers such as T.L. Taylor, John A. L. Banks and James Paul Gee, whose work with players has provided valuable insights into how games are played, understood, and influenced by player communities. It is further informed by narrative theories, particularly reader-response theory, as well as insights into participatory culture and the notions of player agency and authority. These influences are brought together with comments and observations from research participants who were interviewed and observed playing the game.

Approaching players as active participants and creators of meaning within *GTA IV*'s virtual space yields understanding of the ways in which narrative affects player experience in an open world action game. The research examines the specific ways that participants form coherent narratives from their in-game actions and experiences, which can take them a considerable distance from the main narrative, and allow them to act in

ways that contradict the game's plot and characterisation. Players form fascinating associations and dissociations between their actions and the events of the main game narrative. They demonstrate complex understandings of the roles played by themselves and the avatar in the stories that are explicitly told, or emerge, during play.

The participants interviewed in this thesis discuss the narrative told through the game's missions, the perceived relationship between themselves and the avatar, and the ways they reason through what does and doesn't 'count' as part of the game's primary narrative. They reason through whether or not certain moments they experienced simply didn't happen within the fiction of the game, or whether the story of the avatar, Niko Bellic, is the same as the story of their play experience. Whilst the term 'narrative' has at times been a fraught one in Game Studies, its inclusion and consideration is necessary if we are to understand how narrative is received and constructed by players within digital worlds that encourage play outside of story-driven missions.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed.....

Date.....

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with any piece of ethically research involving participants, I feel that I must put them first. This research is indebted to the players who agreed to be interviewed, whose generosity and hospitality has allowed me to gain valuable insight into their separate experiences with the game, to analyse their styles, opinions and feelings, and to pose to them the questions that drove me to invest in this research in the first place. The willingness of my participants to open up about their experiences, and their excitement at being interviewed for an academic project, further reiterate the importance of involving the player base in research of the games they engage with.

Thanks to my fellow candidates at Flinders, who helped to maintain my sanity and keep my caffeine levels dangerously high. Special mention must go to Scott Macleod; I'd say that I didn't know which of us was a worse influence on the other, but deep down we both know the answer, right? Further thanks are due to the other academics I connected with all over Australia during the last few years, especially the numerous other folks who have been working on games studies – keeping in contact through Twitter has been a good reminder that none of us are alone, and that our work is valuable.

I am indebted to the efforts of my primary supervisor, Melanie Swalwell. Her feedback has been exhaustive, her knowledge frequently overwhelming, and her ability to listen to my thoughts and give suggestions for theoretical grounding has made this thesis possible. Thanks also to my secondary supervisor, Kate Douglas, who gave guidance on the narrative side of things.

In short, thanks to all the friends, family and co-workers who believed in my capacity to produce this thesis. There are too many names to list, but each brainstorming session over lunch or coffee, each unsolicited suggestion of my competence or intelligence, and every word of encouragement had a substantial impact.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"Now that we've colonized physical space, (we) need to have new frontiers. *Grand Theft Auto* expands the universe."
Henry Jenkins, quoted in David Kushner's *Jacked: The Outlaw Story of Grand Theft Auto*, 2012, p. 102.

In October 2001, Rockstar Games released *Grand Theft Auto III* for the Sony PlayStation 2. The game, which puts players in control of a mute protagonist named Claude as he wreaks havoc throughout the fictional Liberty City, was incredibly well received critically and commercially. On review aggregate website *Metacritic* (metacritic.com), the game has an average critical rating of 97%, and remains the sixteenth best reviewed game the site has tracked as of June 2015. While the first two *Grand Theft Auto* games enjoyed some level of success, neither of them is now seen as the cultural milestone the third game (later released on PCs, Xbox, and eventually smartphones and tablets) would prove to be. *Grand Theft Auto III* influenced not only later instalments in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, but the industry as a whole. While games like *Carmaggedon* (Stainless Games, 1997) and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games, 1992) had been successful because of controversy and violence before, *Grand Theft Auto III* combined 'adult' content with an open-world gameplay model, in which the player was free to guide their protagonist through Rockstar's New York facsimile, shooting pedestrians, stealing cars, and (after unlocking the full map through mission progress) exploring the entire city as they saw fit.

The success of *Grand Theft Auto III* has been attributed to many factors, but one of the strongest was how players spread word of their exploits in the game (Kushner 2012, p. 101). By 2001, 50% of the population of the United States of America were connected to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2015); it was the right time for a game like this, which relied heavily on players being able to talk about their experiences. This was a game that prompted discussion between players, whether that meant talking about the game's hidden secrets or, increasingly, about the activities they were performing in-game. It encouraged participation, exploration, and a sharing of anecdotes, stories and information, as have later *Grand Theft Auto* games, including the series' most critically well-received entry (according to the reviews listed on *Metacritic* as of June 2015), *Grand Theft Auto IV*, released in April 2008.

This thesis provides a study of *Grand Theft Auto IV* players and their approaches to, and understandings of, the narratives that emerge during gameplay of the single-player portion of the game. By providing and analysing insights from players into how they parse narrative concepts in an open-world game, a greater understanding of how narrative operates within an open world gameplay model emerges. Much as reader-response theory argues that a book should not be considered separate from its audience, this thesis places value on the stories players tell me about their experiences within the game, about their feelings towards the central plot, how characterisation affects their play style, and whether they see a singular 'true' narrative path that emerges in the game, one in which every action they take makes sense within the game's world. Through discussions with my participants a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between the player, avatar and narrative emerge. Through player insight, this thesis develops an important understanding of how different players might reason

through narrative elements in a game that allows and encourages them to act outside of social norms, to defy the feelings of the characters they play as, and to deviate from the path established by the game's missions.

The discourse around the *Grand Theft Auto* series has focused largely on whether or not playing these games can have negative effects on players. The creativity of *Grand Theft Auto* players, the ways they reason through the events on screen, their collaborations and their inventive, original thought processes that occur during gameplay are largely ignored in favour of examining how likely players are to re-enact the series' more depraved elements.

The larger discussions prompted by moral panics over the central concept of the series have oversimplified our understanding of the player base, many of whom continually exhibit great creativity and passion during their play experiences, and all of whom must use a degree of thought and reasoning to determine the nature of the personal narratives that are created by their interactions with the game. This thesis proposes that it is time to examine the player's relationship with avatar, narrative and on-screen action beyond discussing the likelihood of players replicating the game outside of the virtual world.

At the same time, it is worth stating that there is certainly merit to the argument that *Grand Theft Auto* games contain problematic elements: in December 2014 an online petition at *Change.org* arguing that *Grand Theft Auto V* (released September 2013) was "encourag(ing) players to murder women for entertainment" (*Change.org*, 2014) was successful in convincing Target Australia, and later Kmart Australia, to remove the game from their store shelves. This speaks to a broader issue within gamer culture: in

2014, the most important discussion around videogames centred on the ideologies of the 'Gamergate' movement, a group of self-appointed online activists who, whilst claiming to be concerned with issues of ethics in games journalism, were responsible for the harassment of numerous prominent figures in what they dubbed the 'Social Justice Warrior' movement. Since 2014 several women (along with men who identify as feminists) have been targeted by hate campaigns, most infamously Zoe Quinn, who was accused by an ex-partner of sleeping with a journalist at gaming website *Kotaku* in exchange for positive coverage (Stuart, 2014). In this context, concern over an incredibly popular videogame series having a problematic portrayal of women and sex work is entirely understandable, and this thesis in no way excuses these flaws within the series. The interviews were conducted prior to the release of *Grand Theft Auto V,* and well before the Gamergate controversy erupted. When the concept of a 'moral panic' is evoked in this thesis, especially within participant testimony, it relates more to violence as a broad theme. Issues explicitly concerning the depiction of violence against women were not discussed in any depth with my participants, although this was not a conscious choice: at no point in my observations did any participants actively target women, speak out against sex workers and/or their depiction within the series, or use offensive terms targeting women.

Players have engaged with the *Grand Theft Auto* in myriad different ways. Each participant talked about how their play style was (or wasn't) influenced by the characterisation of the avatar, how the overarching narrative affected their play style outside of the game's missions, and generally had opinions to express on the concept of narrative, and how it applied to the game. As Kiri Miller (2008) notes, "imaginative exploration of *GTA*'s various '-scapes' leads many players to adopt ethnographic habits

of mind, whether or not they would ever describe them that way". Players experiment with the game's society of simulation, to see if it reacts in ways that are recognisable to them: for instance, they may test to see if the police are quicker to react to their crimes in different neighbourhoods, depending on the affluence of their surroundings. This thesis gives voice to these experiences and thoughts, and considers how each individual player arrives at their own interpretations of various game elements. To investigate the underdeveloped area of videogame player experiences with narrative, I have spoken with five players. These are voices that are often missing from Game Studies; as Benjamin Bigl (2009, p. 2) puts it, "there is a lack: the perspective of those, who actually play games, is missing." This is not to say that there isn't a precedent for authors conducting research with players; whether the authors themselves are involved playing the game (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Pinchbeck, 2009), or investigating others playing (Banks, 2003; Gee, 2004; Swalwell, 2011; Taylor, 2006; Witkowski, 2012), there is a wealth of player research, but there is still more ground to cover. Ethnographic and player observational research into the *Grand Theft Auto* series is lacking, aside from Kiri Miller's '"Grand Theft Auto" and Digital Folklore' (2008), and her *Game Studies* piece 'The Accidental Carjack: Ethnography, Gameworld Tourism, and Grand Theft Auto' (2008), which ultimately suggests that performing further studies with players would be worthwhile. I am also conducting my research from a culturally informed position. I am an avid videogame player and professional games critic and journalist, with an intricate knowledge of *Grand Theft Auto IV* and other similar games; this is important to note, as it affects my own position as the administrator of the interviews I have conducted for this research. As T.L. Taylor notes in her book *Raising the Stakes*, the 'insider' nature of gaming community can often only be cracked by being an "avid player and fan" (2012, p.29). I did not have to experience

the ‘otherness’ that many other researchers have experienced while conducting research with players, which is a privilege that I believe is worth recognising.

I have chosen to focus specifically on the single player portion of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, which is, despite its name, the ninth game in the series (not including expansion packs)[1], for numerous reasons. It was with *Grand Theft Auto IV* that the series’ issues with ‘ludonarrative dissonance’ – the idea that the actions committed within the game do not match up with what we understand of the game’s story and characters – were most decried by players and critics. Because the avatar, Niko Bellic, seems himself conflicted over the nature of the violence the game allows the player to commit with him, I was curious to see how players reasoned through potential narrative issues relating to the reluctance attributed to the avatar in the game’s script. There’s also the fact that *Grand Theft Auto IV* launched at a time of much greater broadband saturation than the *GTA* games before it, and social networking was far more popular than it had been when the previous games released. Because of this there is more lasting evidence of online discussion than there would have been with prior titles in the series. I would also argue that *Grand Theft Auto IV* is the most interesting game in the series, the one that best captures the ‘real world’ the series has always imitated and exaggerated, and which most thoroughly explores the consequences of one’s actions. The creative options the game allows clash with the objectives of the script and characterisation, forcing the player to deal with the rationale of their actions in interesting ways.

[1] Previous games in the series: *Grand Theft Auto* (1997), *Grand Theft Auto 2* (1999), *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001), *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), *Grand Theft Auto Advance* (2004), *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories* (2005), *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories* (2006). In addition, *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars* released in 2009, and *Grand Theft Auto V* released in 2013.

The preservation of player experience is important as well. As Stuckey et. al. mention in their paper 'Remembrance of Games Past: The Popular Memory Archive', the recorded memories of players can "contribute to building games history, to become a resource for both institutions and current and future researchers"(2013, p. 1). *Grand Theft Auto IV* is, as of right now, a fairly recent game, but these memories may fade or be revised by the players in their minds if not recorded. Beyond this though, the player observations are inherently interesting enough to warrant study and attention. Worthwhile critiques of games are not exclusively the domain of professional critics or academics, and the stories that emerge from players outside of these circles demand to be heard and recognised. The observations made by players who engage with the game purely for the sake of entertainment are not recorded or discussed outside of those player's own social circles, but there is value in examining them. By studying how the players interviewed for this thesis reasoned through numerous issues relating to narrative, a complex picture is formed of the myriad ways players can identify and interpret their role within the game world, their ability to craft stories, and their ever-shifting relationship with the playable avatar. Each player has an "intimate, individual ownership of the gameworld" (Miller, 2008) that results in a myriad of different responses and strategies emerging around how players engage with the game's narrative elements.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides a comprehensive examination of the literature informing this study, and the methodology behind my participant research, allowing me to frame my research and where it fits within existing areas of study and discussion. The second chapter deals with the experience the players reported when engaging with the game's 'primary' narrative, the one told through the

missions, the cutscenes, and the 'choice' moments the player is given. This establishes the numerous ways the players engage with the game's 'campaign' and thus the position that they approach their personally authored narrative experiences from. The third chapter is about the relationship between the player and the avatar, and the ways one can flit between different modes of identification and separation during a play experience. Chapter four deals directly with player-driven narrative experiences, or what I am refer to as 'non-canon' experiences: moments of gameplay in which the player participates in or creates events that they do not consider to be a part of the established series of ordered events that occur during the virtual life of their avatar. Finally, chapter five delves further into the nature of co-authored narrative experiences, of story-telling and sharing that occurs following gameplay. It explores how, and why, players share information about their time playing.

This thesis presents, through several player responses to the game, a broader picture of the varied ways in which players are able to uniquely reason through the game's numerous narrative elements. It goes well beyond the question of whether *Grand Theft Auto* is harmful, and will offer an approach based on ethnographic traditions to the player/avatar relationship when it is isolated within a single player experience. The game's world, its characters, and the stories that occur within and around them, both through the game's written script and the player's actions, can present personal challenges to the discerning player. Unique reasoning is required, and conscious efforts are made to separate elements that occur within their gameplay sessions into separate categories of what 'counts' and what 'doesn't count'. By moving through the responses from participants, and examining the reasoning and decisions that go into their play experiences, this thesis acknowledges the significance of the personal ways that players

approach games.

Grand Theft Auto IV is a game that encourages creativity without actively being *about* creativity. While events and game releases that have occurred during the writing of this thesis (such as the incredible success of *Minecraft*) have provided case studies of games in which player creativity and perseverance is the main appeal of a game, the low-key, moment-by-moment thought and reasoning that can go into a game like *Grand Theft Auto IV* deserves to be explored in greater detail as well. By examining these various approaches players take to understanding, creating and engaging with the game's numerous narrative possibilities, a clearer picture emerges of how essential it is that we examine player experience if we wish to fully understand how various forms of narrative operate within open-world titles such as *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

CHAPTER II
i. LITERATURE REVIEW

In his foreword to Raph Koster's book *A Theory of Fun* (2005), game designer Will Wright provides a simplified overview of the academic field for digital games:

> The academic interest seems twofold: First is the recognition that video games probably represent an emerging new medium, a new design field, and possibly a new art form. All of these are worthy of study. Second, there are an increasing number of motivated students that grew up playing these games and now find themselves inspired to work in the field one day. They want to find schools that will help them understand what games are and how to make them. (xiii)

As with other media, games academia can potentially inform both the consumers and creators of games. The two interests Wright considers are not mutually exclusive: any in-depth discussion of an 'art form' inevitably considers how it was produced. However, this quote does capture some of the underlying tensions of games academia, and the basic idea that it has been pulled in multiple directions. The field of Game Studies has grown far too big to encapsulate entirely, but there are key moments, arguments and movements that have emerged which are invaluable to my own work. It is important to contextualise a project dealing with issues of 'narrative' – a fraught term – and to ground my own observations and thoughts within the existing literature. The outlining of my methodology allows for greater transparency, and emphasises the importance of involving players, such as my participants, in Game Studies.

THE LUDOLOGY/NARRATOLOGY DEBATE AND BEYOND

In the early years of Game Studies, many of the primary arguments and studies revolving around games focused on a discussion of how games should be studied, rather than actually examining the games themselves with much depth. As Ian Bogost (2009) puts it, "the idea of studying the medium itself over its content has become a natural order". As my research is positioned at the intersection between digital games and narrative, I must acknowledge that the relationship between these two terminologies has been the subject of much debate. Even the very idea of studying games as 'texts' is contentious; as Daniel Golding has noted, "even the usage of the single word 'videogame' represents a conscious decision in this young field" (2009, p. 2). There is, historically, much debate over the terminology used in Game Studies. An overview of the debate between so-called narratologists and ludologists is necessary when studying how players perceive narrative concepts within games, as it allows me to frame my own studies within the wider context of what has come before.

The argument in favour of 'ludology', the idea that games should be studied mostly through their rules and mechanics, was rampant throughout games studies up until around the mid-2000s. Markku Eskelinen, one of the most oft-quoted ludologists, states that "if you know your narrative theory (…) you won't argue that games are (interactive or procedural) narratives or anything even remotely similar" (2004, p. 36). Jesper Juul's 2001 article in *Game Studies,* 'Games Telling Stories? A brief note on games and narratives' exemplifies the extremist views adopted by this argument rather well:

> Do games tell stories? Answering this should tell us both *how* to study games and *who* should study them. The affirmative answer suggests that games are easily studied from within existing paradigms. The negative implies that we must start afresh.

Gonzalo Frasca argued in 2003 that "games and narratives provide authors with essentially different tools for conveying their opinions and feelings…videogames are just a particular way of structuring simulation, just like narrative is a form of structuring representation" (p. 222). Yet that same year, he attempted to distance himself from this argument, claiming on his personal site *Ludology.org* that "this debate as presented never really took place because it was cluttered with a series of misunderstandings and misconceptions" (2003). The argument for narratology in game studies, and the stance of the 'narratologist', is harder to define. In the field of traditional literature and narrative studies narratology typically refers to discourse, or the method of storytelling. Academics that have been labelled as narratologists, such as Janet Murray and Marie-Laure Ryan, do not tend to dismiss any fundamentals of ludology within their own writing, nor have they stated that narrative is a fundamental keystone of understanding games as a whole. Several academics have, instead, argued that studying games requires a more nuanced, broader understanding of their impact than ludology may allow for. Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson, for example, believe that "focusing on a refined 'gameness' partly denies the connection between games and broader cultural histories and theoretical perspectives (2008, p. 4). Even when this debate is not explicitly brought to the fore, what exactly constitutes 'narrative' in a game is a contentious issue. The issue isn't so much whether interactive storytelling can be achieved, more so what constitutes it. Gordon Calleja has argued that "spirited debates about game narratives in

the game industry and academia have not seen much progress due to their being too stuck in classical notions of narrative developed for non-ergodic media such as film or literature" (2013). When narrative has been discussed, it has often been framed as either the end goal of certain games or as a concept that is hindering discussion; historically, discussions around game narratives have lacked nuance.

The debate has moved on somewhat since then. The debate around proceduralist approaches, for instance, has moved into new ground while running up against familiar issues; Bogost's first coined the term 'procedural rhetoric' in his book *Persuasive Games*, defining it as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (2007, p. ix). In 2011's 'Against Procedurality', Miguel Sicart stated that he wished to "problematize the validity of the procedural rhetoric", arguing that "proceduralist discourse started as a ludological focus on how games can convey political messages". His argument was, essentially, that play is a more personal experience than procedural rhetoric makes it out to be. "When a player engages with a game", he concludes, "we enter the realm of play, where the rules are a dialogue and the message, a conversation".

These discussions, and the terminology they evoke, are important to this thesis. When narrative is discussed in relation to open-world action games, it is often preceded by the word 'procedural'. In the simplest terms, the procedurality argument states that interacting within the game is what generates story, rather than story being a separate element presented outside of gameplay. Janet Murray argued that "the most important element the new medium adds to our repertoire of representational powers is its procedural nature, its ability to capture experience as systems of interrelated actions"

(1998, p. 274). This terminology has since made it into mainstream games criticism, with ‘procedural narrative’ now being a common term used to refer to narrative experiences that arise due to player actions. Gordon Calleja uses the term ‘alterbiography’ when discussing procedural gameplay experiences. The term refers to “the here and now interactions with the game environment that generate story through the players` interpretation of events occurring within the game environment, their interaction with the game rules, human and AI entities and objects” (Calleja, 2009). He argues that the story elements that can potentially emerge through the ergodic experience of gameplay are “not adequately described by classical narratology”, and that a redefinition of our notion of ‘narrative’ in relation to these experiences is necessary, using *GTA IV* specifically as an example of a game that benefits from the application of his terminology. Calleja notes that “when the focus shifts from a pre-scripted to an experiential mode of communicating story the discussion, both in academic and design circles, there is a tendency to equate all aspects of game experience with narrative”. Although Jesper Juul has argued that “you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time” (2001), the term ‘procedural narrative’ has become prolific enough within games culture that it would be fair to say that many critics and players disagree. The argument around procedural narrative, then, is that players surmise and insert narrative elements in the same way they engage with the politics, ideals and ethics embedded in the rules of the game, which Miguel Sicart argues “leads to an understanding of play, and leisure, as mechanical outcomes of processes; outcomes that follow the same production and consumption models as labour” (2011).

Writing about games and narrative means dealing directly with the importance of these terms and definitions. My own view is that, while an understanding of these core arguments behind terminologies and systems are important, the arguments themselves have run their course, and trying to reignite or 'solve' these issues is not my priority. As Ian Bogost said in his 2009 DiGRA keynote in response to the debate, "videogames are a mess. A mess we don't need to keep trying to clean up, if it were even possible to do so." Throughout this thesis I do not examine *GTA IV as* a narrative, but I examine the idea that players create narratives from their experience. When engaging with the game's open world, the player may bring knowledge from the plot presented in the game's missions, or they may choose to ignore them entirely, but regardless of how much this matters to them *GTA IV* has the potential to generate stories, even if they're as simple as a player messaging a friend about the 'crazy cop chase' they just had, or capturing a video of a death that amused or horrified them in some way to share. While the discussions around narrative that have occurred have informed my study methodology, and my own process of examination, it is the player's own concept of narrative and story-telling that has led this research.

Despite criticisms of how narrative has been handled in Game Studies in the past, the term remains important. Narrative may not be a term that we want to use to describe the singular function of games, but if we are reluctant to consider the term at all we bar ourselves from discussing tangentially related concepts, and we ignore the fact that narrative is, for players, a term that frequently comes up when playing and discussing games.

SPATIAL FORMS OF NARRATIVE

There is a great deal of interesting discussion on games as spaces, and how narratives, rules and objectives are mapped out through spatial designs. These discussions often deal with the idea of psychogeography, "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals" (Debord, 2008, p. 23) a theory that can easily be applied to virtual spaces.

At Freeplay 2010 in Melbourne, Australia, game designer Alex Bruce spoke about his game *Antichamber* (then known as *Hazard: The Journey of Life*), which is focused on the player navigating a series of non-Euclidean geometric spaces. The game is designed so that the navigation of various spaces operates as commentary on and metaphor of various philosophical ideas and general life concepts. *Antichamber* is focused on visual navigation as a form of puzzle solving, a game concept that comes under critical scrutiny when a game is considered hard to navigate. As Bernadette Flynn notes, "the seduction of objects (avenues, doorways, pick-ups) attract players' towards or deflects them away from game goals, thereby structuring not only aesthetic immersion but also the procedural logic of gameplay" (2008, 38). Many discussions on spatiality have comprised in-depth analysis of specific titles, such as Daniel Golding's discussion of Valve's 2007 hit *Portal* in his honours thesis. He discusses how the game stalls progress early on to encourage environmental observation, outlines objectives through diegetic signs and actions, and "draws player attention to pathways for solutions" (2009, p. 23). Nan Zheng places a similar focus on the concept of space when discussing the online game world of *Second Life,* stating that "for geographers, the cyberspace creates new

social space without the formal qualities of geographic space" (2009, p. 95). Speaking more broadly, Henry Jenkins refers to games "less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (2004, p. 199). Spatial awareness is a major theme running throughout these academic works, and one that often gives more attention to specific titles.

PURPOSES OF GAMING

A lot of the academic discussion is focused on surmising where the 'enjoyment' or 'fun' in gaming comes from, and trying to summarise what, exactly, makes a game 'good'. These are questions that each player can answer for themselves when playing a game; the participants in my research discussed why *Grand Theft Auto IV* was an enjoyable game for them, and all presented different theories on what games like this one should accomplish. This is a common question between both players and researchers. Jesper Juul writes in *Half-Real* that "rules are the most consistent source of player enjoyment in games" (2005, p. 55). Esther MacCallum-Stewart echoes these sentiments when she writes that "to enjoy a sense of agency within a game, a player needs a purpose and a clear set of goals by which to reach this purpose" (2010, p. 290). Barry Atkins considers a different angle from which a player can enjoy a game's rules when he discusses the concept of the 'subversive reader', who understands how a game is 'meant' to be played, but "will deliberately reject any notion that this is the only way the game fiction can be read or played" (2003, 50). Being subversive, by his definition, can range between exploiting in-game bugs, using cheat codes, or simply playing in a way not enforced by the game's rules, as is the case with Ben Abraham's *Permanent Death* saga (*SLRC - Subterranean Loner Rendered Comatose*, 2009) in which he played *Far Cry 2*

with the intention of quitting the game if his in-game character died. The issue of in-game cheats also brings up interesting questions of purpose. Julian Kucklich, in her discussion on cheating in games, notes that "there is hardly a game that does not come with either built-in cheat codes or design loop-holes that can be exploited by cunning gamers" (2005, p. 52).

These discussions centre on the concepts of player agency and authority. Esther MacCallum-Stewart argues that theory is being rewritten for games in ways that leak across multiple media:

> Mystery adventure, long-haul television series, and reality television games involve the deliberate manipulation by the viewer/player of a simplified reading of Barthian[2] enigma; leading to his construction of the writerly, where the viewer/player becomes an agent who creates their own text rather than proceeding through a given authorial narrative (2010, p. 280).

Discussing the narrative in his game *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, Jordan Mechner states that, as a rule, "the gameplay isn't there to serve the story; it's the other way around" (2007, p. 112). Although this is certainly true in most cases (and this particular game was very well received), it could be argued that this has not been the case in several games, especially if hypertexts are brought into consideration. To take an extreme example, the Russian PC game *Pathologic* is often praised as an incredible experience primarily because of its difficult design choices and its lack of genuine 'fun'. Lewis Denby declared to the readers of *Eurogamer* that the game was a must-play,

[2] When using the term 'Barthian', MacCallum-Stewart cites her source as: Barthes, R. (1970). S/Z. In R. Miller (Ed. & Trans., 1991). New York: Hill and Wang.

"even though you won't enjoy it" (2009). Tied into the idea that games are fun is that of games as a form of escapism, a word used often to describe the effect games have on the player. There are examples of games that actively note that the characters within the narrative are participating in a sort of escapism. *No More Heroes* (Grasshopper Manufacture, 2008) and *Mafia 2* (2K Czech, 2010), for instance, both have their characters engage in mundane jobs between action-based levels, to highlight their gameplay as a form of escapism from the mundanity of the typical working-person lifestyle. The argument that games should be 'fun' is inherently limiting, although the term is still useful – most of the participants in this study definitely appeared to be having fun with the game. Often though, discussions about 'fun' marginalise the potential for games to present compelling narratives, or to focus on elements that might not be considered fun. Raph Koster equates certain narrative elements in games to metaphors that are overlayed over the basic gameplay structure in *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (2004). Using *Deathrace* (Exidy, 1976) as an example, he argues that "its 'dressing' is largely irrelevant to what the game is about at its core" (p. 84). He also makes the claim that "story, setting and backplot in games are nothing more than an attempt to give a side dish to the brain while it completes its challenges" (p. 87). To dismiss this opinion would be wrong, as certainly his description could be applied to a great many games. These all-encompassing discussions on 'fun' in games exemplify why a more focused, direct consideration of specific games is useful when discussing narrative and literary technique.

Outside the academic field, it is easier to find writings based around content rather than medium, such as Ben Abraham's aforementioned *Permanent Death* saga. Michael Clarkson's 'Critical Compilation' for *Grand Theft Auto IV* is a good example of the

breadth of content being written about the game outside of academia. Posted online 18 months after the game's release, Clarkson's compilation (*Critical Distance*, 2009), links to 82 separate articles and blog entries (no 'reviews') written about the game, with comments on the article criticizing him for the 'narrow' field these pieces have been taken from. Ultimately, the difficulty of pinning down exactly what games should achieve for their players is central to my argument in this thesis that each player approaches the game with their own unique expectations, informed by personal histories and philosophies.

NARRATIVE STUDIES

Presenting research that intersects between disciplines requires a careful examination of the terminologies that cross between them, particularly considering how apprehensive Game Studies have been, historically, to embrace narrative studies. Ian Bogost noted the nebulous nature of the concept of 'literature' several times in his book *Unit Operations*, discussing the idea of the literary critic as *bricoleur* and referencing Gerard Genette's theory that "literary criticism (…) is a process of borrowing concepts and putting them to use" (2006, p. 50). *Bricolage* is a term that can be applied to games as well; Esther MacCallum-Stewart, for example, argues that games often utilise "transmedial elements borrowed from popular culture" (2010, p. 287), while the narratives discussed in this thesis are the result of players bringing together numerous elements of the game to construct their own stories.

The terminologies of narrative studies have often made their ways into Game Studies. In *Cybertext*, Espen J. Aarseth explicitly refers to games as literature, albeit 'ergodic'

literature, in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1997, p.1). At the same time, however, Aarseth writes "I wish to challenge the recurrent practice of applying theories of literary criticism to a new empirical field, seemingly without any reassessment of the terms of concepts involved" (1997, p. 14). Sixteen years after the publication of *Cybertext*, Gordon Calleja argued that "spirited debates about game narratives in the game industry and academia have not seen much progress due to their nature of being too stuck in classical notions of narrative developed for non-ergodic media such as film or literature" (2013), and that a new model should be formulated that takes player involvement into account.

There continues to be a problematic lack of consensus around the term 'narrative', what it means and how it should be used. H. Porter Abbott defines narrative very simply as "the representation of an event or series of events", but recognises that many scholars "require more than this" (2008, p. 13) in their personal definitions of narrative. The interplay between definitions of 'plot', 'story' and 'narrative' are also worth considering. Paul Cobley describes the difference by saying:

> Put very simply, 'story' consists of all the events which are to be depicted. Plot is the chain of causation which dictates that these events are somehow linked and that they are therefore to be depicted in relation to each other. 'Narrative' is the showing or the telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place (2001, pp. 5-6).

John Drakakis writes in his introduction to Paul Cobley's *Narrative* that "the current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate

concerning basic questions of terminology"(2001, p. ix). This is doubly so when trying to apply these terms to videogames. Discussing *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Shenmue*, Gonzalo Frasca writes, "both *GTA3* and *Shenmue* tell a story (however, this is essentially different than saying that they are stories)" (2010). This distinction in the terminology hints at how these terms have been problematized, and how carefully academics must tread when making use of them in relation to games.

While some critics hold the view that 'narrative' is potentially too complicated to be fully translated into games, this is at odds with Paul Cobley's claim that "even the most 'simple' of stories is embedded in a network of relations that are sometimes astounding in their complexity" (2001, p. 2). If stories are inherently complex, and yet we still have stories that we view as 'simple', it may mean that our perceptions of what kind of narratives can or cannot be told in interactive media are skewed or lacking. Barry Atkins, on the other hand, notes that there are some stories and narratives that are best explored through games, citing *Close Combat*, a game in which you can lead the Nazis to victory in World War II if you are so inclined. He states that the fact that the story is told through a game "provided some defence against some of the most obvious forms of criticism that such a fiction might encounter" (2003, p. 3); because the player is in charge of the choice to have the Nazis prosper, the game is able to present this course of action without directly commenting on it, or taking a moral position.

Other narrative theories and writings seem to indicate that games have potential to achieve things that are not possible within more 'traditional' forms of narrative. As Marie-Laure Ryan notes, the intentions of both fiction writers and the creators of 'virtual realities' are often the same (2001, p. 89). The goals of games are often to etch

out spaces or moments, she argues, so that they can be tangibly experienced in the same way a reader may feel that they have experienced a space or moment that has been described well. Catherine Kohler Riessman discusses the limits of representation in narrative in *Narrative Analysis*:

> All forms of representation of experiences are limited portraits. Simply stated, we are interpreting and creating texts at every juncture, letting symbols stand for or take the place of the primary experience, to which we have no direct access. Meaning is ambiguous because it arises out of a process of interaction between people: self, teller, listener and recorder, analyst, and reader (1993, p. 15).

Although this description of limitation is made in reference to a trip to the beach, it can easily be applied to any sort of story. If we then apply this limitation to any given videogame, we may find that we have greater 'direct access' to the experience by way of interaction.

Reader-response theory has become ingrained in how many texts and media are understood, the act of 'reading' extending beyond digesting words from a page. Although the majority of popular writing on the subject appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, (Harkin, 2005, p. 410) well before videogame studies became prominent, reader-response theory has been used to encompass multiple forms of media and interaction. The ways that various things are "received by their audiences not as a repository of stable meaning but as an invitation to make it" (Harkin, 2005, p. 415) is also applicable to the way players make sense of a videogame. The desire of players to share their

responses is an innate part of the storytelling process; keeping their stories to one's self negates the widely accepted purpose of stories as something to be shared. Examining more recent theoretical frameworks allows for a better understanding of the logistics behind how players respond to their games.

ii. METHODOLOGY

This study has involved in-depth interviews with five participants, each of whom I interviewed about their experiences with *Grand Theft Auto IV*. They were given an outline of my thesis in advance, and were made aware that I would be talking to them about narrative, the plot of the game and the characterisation of its protagonists, and the stories that emerge from their play experiences, including those that they shared with other players. Four of these participants were interviewed while I observed them playing the game in their homes, while the fifth spoke to me in a public setting. Each participant had previously completed all of the main missions in the game, and three of them had played the game all the way through from the beginning more than once.

The participants agreed to qualitative interviews and observations, during which all our conversations were recorded, notes were hand-written (but not shared) as we went to retain certain details of the play experience, and each participant agreed to make themselves available, at their own discretion, for any follow-up interviews required. Sessions ranged from an hour to an hour and a half. Three of the participants welcomed me to stay in their homes for a while afterwards for further discussion about games, although these were outside the terms outlined in the contract given to each participant and were thus not recorded. Ultimately, the wealth of notes and observations that emerged from a single session with each player did not necessitate additional sessions, although some of the participants were contacted afterwards to clarify details from our discussion or provide further information.

Ethnography in game worlds has frequently focused upon online communities within

massive multiplayer online role playing games, commonly referred to as MMORPGs or MMOs such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), *EverQuest* (Daybreak Game Company, 1999) and *Second Life* (Linden Research, Inc., 2003). There are numerous researchers who have conducted ethnographic research with MMO players (Castronova, 2005; Ondrejka, 2006; Smith, 2006, Steinkuehler, 2006 Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2001).The majority of studies on the content or mechanics of an MMO inevitably deal with ethnography; these games are structured with the specific intent of encouraging interaction between players, the formation of 'guilds', and questing that frequently necessitates the combined efforts of multiple players. They present sites in which researchers can act as a participant-as-observer, joining online communities in order to study them. Steinkeuhler (2006) argues that MMO games are social simulations, capable of rendering societies that can be used to study reactions to incentive structures, political and economic systems, and how social order can evolve or dissolve in online spaces. Indeed, videogames are often studied and discussed as 'social' tools. Dmitri Williams (2006) argues that studying videogames has become popular recently because "a lot of people are playing together", and states that the rise in social gaming is a result of a "decline in real-world places to meet and converse with real people". This implies that 'gamers' engage with videogames in lieu of something more tangible and grounded in reality, a presumptuous argument. Ethnographic studies into MMO worlds are frequently concerned with how the concepts examined apply to the 'society' of the game world, and how they mimic or replicate activities in corporeal space. The actions of a single player or clan in an MMO will frequently affect other players, and the stories that emerge from these interactions can be fascinating. The game *EVE Online* (CCP, 2003), for example, is popular in games discourse because of the in-game criminality that occurs: there is potential for players to scam one another

and take down in-game businesses. In 2010, user 'Bad Bobby' initiated a scam that ended with him earning in-game credits with a real-world value of $45,000US (Drain, 2010); there are numerous examples of incidents within the game that have prompted discussions, even among those who do not play the game. Incidents like this mirror real-world examples of corporate espionage and intrigue, and MMO worlds can be framed as 'societies' in which real people interact.

There are multiple ideas of 'culture' at play when we consider MMO societies. T. L. Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* examines cultural practices within *Everquest* through player interaction, ritual and habits within the game, but also through external methods of communication, both online and in real life. She opens with a description of an *Everquest* convention, a real-life meet-up of *Everquest* players that encouraged attendees to meet with other members of their 'guilds' and take part in various activities, stating that in the aftermath of the event it was clear to her that "social connections, collective knowledge, and group action are central to the individual's experience" (Taylor, 2006, p. 9). The social order of online spaces, she says, leak over into other spheres, whether online (forums, blogs) or offline spaces. Ultimately becoming part of a videogame culture, even if it is online or in-game, requires a navigation of social norms and an understanding of the value and intelligence of others. MMOs are interesting because the player's successful navigation of them is often reliant on their ability to be a productive member of a virtual society.

My research, presented in this thesis, has involved talking to players about their experiences in a single-player game. It is not strictly an ethnographic study in the traditional sense – it has involved discrete participant observation, rather than

immersing myself within new cultures or communities – but it is heavily influenced by the methodologies of the ethnographic studies mentioned thus far. Although many of these studies into videogames have involved players who either play multiplayer games, or who play together with others, the experience of playing a single-player game has been somewhat neglected. Of course, as a participant, I have had to acknowledge in my research that my presence would have changed some variables of how my players acted, but the nature of the gameplay experience is still very different from what has typically been studied. The participants were asked to talk about their own interpretations of the game and the emerging narrative experiences that they have engaged with when playing the game alone. This is a kind of play that is inherently hard to study, but my research allows for an understanding of different player thought processes that emerge when the player's actions do not impact directly on other players. In this way, the focus of this study differs from numerous others that have focused on communities.

The recruitment methods used ensure that the participants involved in this thesis are active consumers of videogames, or at least the discussions surrounding them. As Henry Jenkins puts it, broad fan cultures, such as those who we could identify as 'gamers', "can be glimpsed only through local details rather than measured in (their) entirety" (1992, p.3). This means that the documented and analysed actions of players presented in this thesis cannot be said to represent the actions, feelings or responses of *all* 'gamers'. Videogames have become an intrinsic part of broader society, and attributing certain values to 'fans' widely would be a misleading representation of *GTA IV*'s potential demographic. According to Dovey and Kennedy, videogames are "the most established of all sectors of the emergent new media landscape" (2006, p. 2) – a debatable statement, but one that also highlights the scope of their influence and

popularity.

THE PARTICIPANTS

For this study, five participants (all of whom have been given pseudonyms in the body of this thesis) were sought. All five participants lived in South Australia, and were male, although gender was not an intentional variable: there were simply no female responses to my participation requests, which were posted to local gaming forums (three of my recruits came from the now-defunct *Games On Net* forums) and from recommendations through friends of friends. This was not unexpected, as the nature of the research involved the participants allowing a stranger into their homes to observe them playing a game, and the unfortunate history of hostility towards women who identify as 'gamers' makes it understandable. This will ideally be less of an issue for future researchers in this field. Although it is unfortunate that all of my respondents were males, ultimately, this did not affect the variety in the responses I received – although further perspectives would no doubt be extremely valuable, and seeking the voices of women and trans players is tremendously important (as well as players of different races, religions and backgrounds), in the context of this particular study, the input of these five men proved extremely useful.

DAVID

David is in his mid-40s, and lives in a house with his wife and daughters. His youngest daughter was present during our interview, and occasionally had to be dissuaded from looking at the screen. David, who was recruited through an online forum, is an avid PC

game player, and has since our interview become a prominent streamer, making a living from his streams of Minecraft.

GEORGE

George, a man in his mid-to-late 20s, had not played GTA IV since the 19th of December 2008, according to his save files (our interview was conducted in February 2012). He had reviewed the game for a now defunct website at the time of its release, although as of our interview he no longer wrote about games online, despite still having many friends in the local 'gaming' community. He lived alone in a spacious apartment, but had originally played the game in his room at his parents' house.

KYLE

Kyle, was in his late teens or early 20s at the time of the interview. He lived with his parents and played the game in their lounge room while I spoke to him. He had rearranged himself for the purpose of the interview before I arrived, moving his PlayStation 3 from his bedroom into the lounge room; it was not how he usually played, but it was clear that he was more comfortable this way if he was to be observed. He asked several times if there was a specific way I wanted him to play, but ultimately settled down when I assured him that he could do whatever he wanted. His father was briefly present towards the end of the session, but did not stop to watch or comment.

MARCUS

Marcus, also in his mid-20s, lived with his wife in a small apartment at the time of the interview. He showed me the game running on his computer, which he took obvious pride in, but also owned it on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. His wife was present for part of the interview, but did not participate.

BARRY

Barry, in his early to mid-20s, initially finished the game on Xbox 360, but has since purchased it again on PC after scratching his disc copy. He originally played the game on a standard definition television while living at his parents' house. A last minute issue resulted in me conducting this interview in public rather than in private, although Barry replayed sections of the game shortly before our meeting to reacquaint himself with the experience. This meant that I was not able to observe him in quite the same way that I was able to observe the others playing, but our conversation was still interesting and enlightening, touching on many of his personal play philosophies. Barry had, at the time, aspirations to become a paid games critic, writing reviews and news for websites and running his own gaming podcast with friends.

CHAPTER III: PLAYER EXPERIENCES WITH THE ESTABLISHED NARRATIVE & THE GAME WORLD

> "Somebody told me also in the Hindu religion avatar means an incarnation. So I keep wondering – when you pass from this side of the screen over into virtual reality, is that like dying and being reincarnated, see what I'm saying?"
>
> Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge,* 2013, pp 69-70.

This chapter seeks to establish the numerous ways *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s protagonist, Niko Bellic, is developed through the storyline, missions and choices woven into the game by the developers and writers, and how the player's understanding of the narrative and characters influences how they play. Before analysing how players interpreted the narratives that emerged from their play experiences, it is important establish how they approached the story being told through the game's single-player campaign. *GTA IV* contains a 'primary' narrative, which unfolds as the player engages with the game's 94 main missions. In this chapter I also provide a description and analysis of the gameplay mechanics, user interface and controls that my participants were familiar with, and delve into their reactions to the events that occur in these missions. By doing this I establish the base line of knowledge and understanding that each player formed in the early stages of first playing the game. By outlining this knowledge that the players possessed, I am able to better illustrate how the game operates, the options that are open to the player when they interact with the world, and the mechanics through which the game world is occupied and interacted with.

PLOT AND STRUCTURE

The game's story starts with Niko Bellic first arriving in Liberty City; the point at which it 'ends' is harder to clarify, although the most logical end-point, considering standard narrative conventions, would be when the credits roll at the end of the final mission, even though the game allows you to continue playing within the game world after this. Outside of the missions, the player is free to roam Liberty City as they see fit, a mode of play which Kiri Miller proposes "combines elements of *ludus* and *paideia* – the defining qualities of goal-oriented games and flexible 'play' environments, respectively" (2008). Marie-Laure Ryan makes a distinction between two forms of combined narrativity/interactivity that align well with how *Grand Theft Auto* games can be played:

> …the *narrative game*, in which narrative meaning is subordinated to the player's actions, and the *playable story*, in which the player's actions are subordinated to narrative meaning. Or to put it differently, in a narrative game, story is meant to enhance gameplay, while in a playable story, gameplay is meant to produce a story (2009, 45).

GTA IV's distinct separation between mission structure and free-play structure is studied in this chapter through the participant's understanding of the portions of the game that present the primary storyline, and how their choices and actions within the game are influenced by what certain narrative threads mean to them. Studying the play experience players have can add a great deal to our understanding of how they actually deal with and incorporate the knowledge gained from the script into their gameplay.

While the *Grand Theft Auto* series is most well-known for the antics players can engage in outside of the mission structure, to frame these actions as being separate from the content the developers have clearly intended as the focus of the product would be to oversimplify the complex relationship that forms between player and game.

The mainstream reviews of *GTA IV*, published at the time of its release, frequently praised the quality of the game's writing and story. These comments from IGN.com's review of the game are typical:

> Don't worry, GTA's famed over-the-top action and tongue-in-cheek humour are intact, but there is a new level of sophistication in the characters and the game world that raises the story above the norm. As Niko becomes mired in the death throes of American organized crime, he begins to become more self-aware. Niko's struggles with his ruthless nature never inhibit the gameplay, but instead enhance the emotional gravity of a brilliant storyline. The more absurd the action becomes, the greater we feel the very real pathos of Niko Bellic (Goldstein, 2008).

Niko is a character with a well-developed back story and personality. The reactions of the players interviewed weren't generally out of line with these sentiments, but they also exhibited a broader range of interpretations of the characters, the game world and the plot, all of which were informed, in different ways, by their understanding of the narrative established through missions and cutscenes.

The 'fully rounded' nature of Niko is central to arguments that *GTA IV* suffers from

ludonarrative dissonance; that Niko's character is not in line with what the game allows him to do. Miguel Sicart describes *GTA IV* as "an extremely compelling ethical game experience" (2009, p. 61) as it portrays a protagonist who is, on some level, unhappy with the activities you are guiding him through. Whether Niko is sincere about his stated desire to leave a violent lifestyle behind is debatable; his actions throughout the game's primary narrative tend to suggest otherwise. The player is free, however, to 'shape' the character through their play style in ways that are often (although not always) informed by their interpretation of the protagonist's personality.

The structure of the missions, and the narrative threads that run through them, resemble a television series more so than any other popular method of plot delivery. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar Games, 2002) was modelled after Miami Vice, which Rockstar president Sam Houser considered an ideal role model for a videogame due to its "action scenes (and) missionlike structure"(Kushner, 2012, p. 55) although every *Grand Theft Auto* game after *GTA III* follows a very similar structure. The player initiates a mission by driving to a certain point on the map, marked by a letter representing the name of the person who is sending you on the mission from that location. In *GTA IV* a mission will sometimes be triggered through a phone call, regardless of what the player is doing at the time, although the player is free to decline the phone call or decide not to engage in the mission immediately. Each mission offers its own discrete dialog, revolving around specific characters, while also adding to the player's understanding of the wider plot. Players are free to tackle available missions in any given order, but the delivery of new missions is structured so that you may reach a point where a certain mission can only be unlocked by completing all previously

available missions. This means that playing through a mission is akin to engaging with an 'episode' of *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

The contrast between this 'mission' structure and the possibilities of the game's open world can be understood as a distinction between different modes of narrative available within open world games. Marie-Laure Ryan's *From Narrative Games to Playable Stories* makes a distinction between "the narrative game, in which narrative meaning is subordinated to the player's actions, and the playable story, in which the player's actions are subordinated to narrative meaning" (2009, p. 45), which is relevant here. During missions, the overarching narrative supplements the gameplay; outside of the missions, there is potential for players to ascribe narrative to their actions. The way these actions are interpreted are broken down by Ryan's article in a fairly mechanical fashion when she states that 'interactive narratives' are produced "through a manipulation by the machine of human-produced data in response to the user's input" (2009, p. 47), which does not take into account the storytelling that may occur outside of the screen, both within the player's imagination during gameplay, and afterwards when their experience may be described and written about. In the retelling, the player is unlikely to simply describe the mechanical actions the game processed to facilitate their personal story. Henry Jenkins expresses the distinction in simpler terms:

> One can imagine the game designer as developing two kinds of narratives – one relatively unstructured and controlled by the player as they explore the game space and unlock its secrets; the other prestructured but embedded within the *mis-en-scene* awaiting discovery (2004, p. 126).

The missions are, in fact, embedded within the *mis-en-scene*, projected onto the screen space as an icon on the radar, but also appearing within the space of the game world as arrow markers that Niko must enter to trigger the missions. These markers represent a transition in the game's nature; entering those spaces on the map move the player from unstructured 'free-play' into a new set of rules outlined by the mission design. Barry, who described the game's story as "really involving", said that his idea of the story consisted of both the events of the missions and "the way the characters unfold and they develop, and the way the situations develop", including the optional friend and relationship systems. Every section of the game that required some sort of 'activation', essentially, pushed forward his idea of the story.

MECHANICS AND INTERFACE

It is worth unpacking some of the game's mechanics and user interface methods, to present a rounded understanding of the systems that have, after dozens of hours of play, become innately understood for the players participating in this study. In the single player campaign of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, players control Niko Bellic, an Eastern European man in his thirties who fought during the Yugoslav Wars years earlier. During the game's opening credits he arrives in Liberty City by boat, meeting his cousin Roman at the dock before travelling to the apartment they intend to share together. Although initially excited at having escaped his homeland, he soon discovers that Liberty City is not the ideal paradigm of the 'American Dream' he has envisioned. However, Niko also has personal, nefarious motives for moving to Liberty City; he is seeking Florian Cravic and Darko Brevic, two men he believes were responsible for the

death of his squad during the war. The initial hints that Niko has come to America to escape the violence of his past are misleading, and as the game's plot unfolds it becomes clear that Niko is willing to go to extreme lengths in his pursuit of the idealised 'American Dream' Liberty City seems, at first, to offer. Over the course of the game, Niko aligns himself with and against various people, including criminal families, drug dealers, small-time crooks and members of the mafia. He amasses several friends, some of whom he is able to betray or kill, and can potentially engage in romantic and sexual relationships with between two and five women.

The way each participant came to grips with Niko as a character was essential to their engagement with the avatar. The player's relationship with the avatar is typically complex, and changes on a game-by-game basis. Niko is characterised through the script in ways that differentiate him from the protagonists of past *Grand Theft Auto* games; depending on how much attention players pay to the cutscenes and dialog, and whether or not they particularly care about such aspects of the game, greatly affect how they reason through the events they play through and watch unfold. But for the player, forming an understanding of the character is not necessarily as simple as taking in and processing the information that is given directly. Seth Giddings frames the relationship between player and avatar through the cyborg metaphor:

> Yet if we look at the event of gameplay itself we might rethink the human-nonhuman relationship as one not of an extended cyborg body but of a cybernetic circuit: a flow of information between organic and inorganic

> nodes, the initiation of which cannot be identified in either the player or the machine (2005, p. 5).

While elegantly capturing the literal psychical connection between the player's actions on their electronic devices (whether that be touch screen, control pad or keyboard) and the on-screen movements that they provoke, this metaphor also gives an astute observation of the information transfer that occurs between player and playable character. David, for instance, appreciated the way the game tried to configure the player/avatar relationship by establishing both figures as being 'new' to the game world (Liberty City) at the beginning of the game: "one thing I really appreciate about the design of the game and the storyline is that because Niko's new in town, he doesn't know anybody, and all that, it's the same as you. So you've got that reflection." This illustrates a sense of embodiment achieved through a mirroring of experience between the avatar and the player, that allows both figures to receive a parallel education from Niko's cousin, Roman, in the game's opening mission.

Figure 1: A in-game screenshot from *GTA IV* (PC version). Screenshot courtesy of Jamie Dalzell.

Figure 1 shows protagonist Niko during a moment of peace. The HUD (heads-up display) is minimal, as there is little information that needs to be conveyed to the player in this scene, although the game prefers the more traditional ways of delivering important information (text, numbers and bars on screen) over the less 'gamey', more realistic techniques preferred by some other games (EA Redwood Shore's *Dead Space*, for instance, displays the player's health bar as part of the protagonist's armour, impractically displayed on his back so that the player can view it from the third person perspective). There is, in this way, a separation between the 'screen space' and the '3D space' (Juul, 2009, p. 17), the screen being used to convey information about Niko's relationship with the game world, although none of the participants (or popular critical writing of the game) found reason to criticise the game for this.

Although the game tends to make fairly binary distinctions between its diegetic

information and its on-screen displays, Niko's phone operates in a way that allows it to pass between the game space and the screen space, operating within both spaces concurrently, while also allowing the player to alter their own sense of personal space. Pressing up on the D-Pad in the Xbox 360 version causes the phone to both appear in Niko's hand, and at the bottom right of the screen (Figure 2, below). This is a technique employed by the game to strengthen the connection between player and Niko – the phone is positioned as being simultaneously the property of Niko *and* the player. The customisation options, which allow you to alter your ring tone and background, do not affect Niko in any way, whereas other options for customisation (such as the clothing Niko wears or the car he drives) can directly influence his relationship to the game world, whether by blocking off certain missions if Niko isn't dressed properly or changing dialogue within the romantic dates Niko is able to go on. Yet at the same time the phone is integral to Niko's success within the game world in numerous ways, including how missions play out and his interactions with his 'friends'. The phone menu is also how the player enters into the game's multiplayer modes; however, the 'multiplayer' options within the phone, despite being diegetic options presented on an in-game object, are obviously intended for the player rather than the avatar. Entering into online multiplayer can fundamentally alter the player's perception of their own personal space and turn the potentially private experience of playing the game alone into a shared experience, with extra awareness of environmental sounds and potential distractions becoming important (particularly if the player is using any sort of voice chat application). Although Niko is ostensibly the one manipulating the device, the player must accept that certain options presented on the phone are placed there for their own convenience, rather than his. By simultaneously operating within the boundaries of player space, game space, and screen space, the phone operates as a complex metaphor

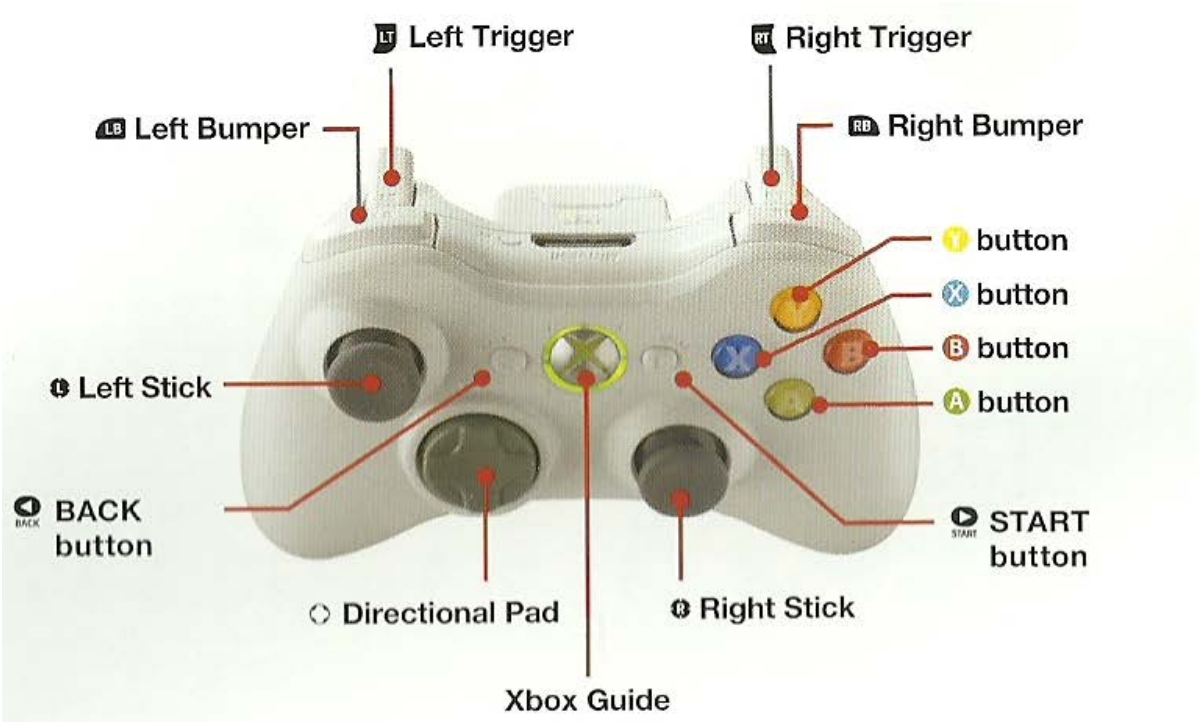
for the different ways in which the player and the avatar are both separate and connected. These elements are important to establish and situate within this thesis because they are integral to the player's sense of the character, keeping them alerted to Niko's well-being and his connections within the game world. They are explained within the missions and are important parts of the avatar's identity.

Figure 2: Niko's phone is represented both in the character's hand, within the '3D space' of the game, but simultaneously appears on the 'screen space' as well. Screenshot courtesy of David (participant).

Once they have finished enough of the game's missions to unlock the full map, the player is free to take Niko anywhere within the game world (a few areas are restricted, but Niko can still enter them – the player will simply need to deal with heavy resistance from police and SWAT once there, as they automatically trigger a high 'wanted' rating). Although missions and side quests can be activated by taking Niko to certain highlighted sections of the map, the player is free to interact with the game world as they choose. Very few of the missions in the game actually focus on the crime of grand

theft auto, although getting around in the game world often necessitates car theft.

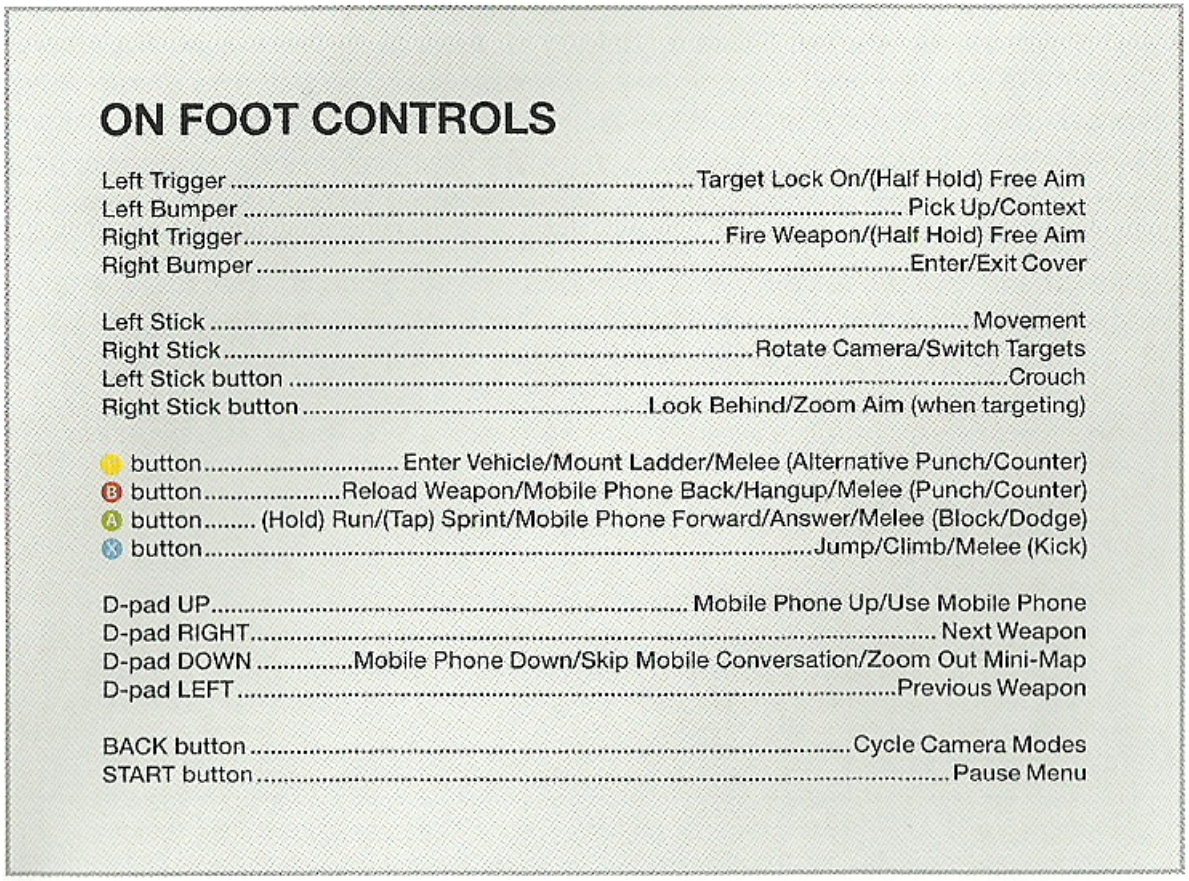
There are in-game rewards for completing missions that extend Niko's abilities, although none of these involve any sort of long-term improvement. If Niko becomes friendly enough with Rastafarian drug dealer Little Jacob, for instance, you gain the ability to call him up at any time and purchase weapons and armour from the back of his van, while friendship with Packie gives you the ability to order that bombs be planted on cars (an ability with few practical applications for players who are seeking to advance in the game; it's an ability designed primarily to have fun with).



IN VEHICLE CONTROLS

Left Trigger	Brake/Reverse
Left Bumper	Fire Weapon
Right Trigger	Accelerate
Right Bumper	Handbrake
Left Stick	Steering
Right Stick	Rotate Camera/Aiming
Left Stick button	Horn/Engage Slow Motion while in Cinematic Camera
Right Stick button	Look Behind
Y button	Exit Vehicle
B button	Cinematic Camera/Mobile Phone Back/Hangup
A button	Handbrake/Mobile Phone Forward/Answer
X button	Change Weapon/(Hold) Headlights
D-pad UP	Mobile Phone Up/Use Mobile Phone
D-pad RIGHT	Next Radio Station/(Hold) Turn Radio On/Off
D-pad DOWN	Mobile Phone Down/Skip Mobile Conversation/Zoom Out Mini-Map
D-pad LEFT	Previous Radio Station/(Hold) Turn Radio On/Off
BACK button	Cycle Camera Modes
START button	Pause Menu

Figure 3: A scan of the 'in-vehicle controls' section of the *GTA IV* manual (Xbox 360 version).



ON FOOT CONTROLS

Left Trigger ..... Target Lock On/(Half Hold) Free Aim
Left Bumper ..... Pick Up/Context
Right Trigger ..... Fire Weapon/(Half Hold) Free Aim
Right Bumper ..... Enter/Exit Cover

Left Stick ..... Movement
Right Stick ..... Rotate Camera/Switch Targets
Left Stick button ..... Crouch
Right Stick button ..... Look Behind/Zoom Aim (when targeting)

Y button ..... Enter Vehicle/Mount Ladder/Melee (Alternative Punch/Counter)
B button ..... Reload Weapon/Mobile Phone Back/Hangup/Melee (Punch/Counter)
A button ..... (Hold) Run/(Tap) Sprint/Mobile Phone Forward/Answer/Melee (Block/Dodge)
X button ..... Jump/Climb/Melee (Kick)

D-pad UP ..... Mobile Phone Up/Use Mobile Phone
D-pad RIGHT ..... Next Weapon
D-pad DOWN ..... Mobile Phone Down/Skip Mobile Conversation/Zoom Out Mini-Map
D-pad LEFT ..... Previous Weapon

BACK button ..... Cycle Camera Modes
START button ..... Pause Menu

Figure 4: A scan from the 'on-foot' controls section of the GTA IV manual (Xbox 360 version).

The control inputs for *GTA IV* (Figures 3 & 4; these are for the Xbox 360 version, although the PlayStation 3 and PC versions feature all the same actions) can initially be quite intimidating, especially as the functions of buttons and sticks can change depending on Niko's current mode of transportation, but are logical for experienced gamers who have built up a certain degree of videogame literacy. It is typical for games on the Xbox 360 and PS3 to use the right trigger for acceleration and the left trigger for braking while in a vehicle, and to use these same controls for shooting and aiming in gun-based combat. But as these control listings demonstrate, there is a great deal to memorise if the player wants to enjoy an optimum input, and facilitate logical control over the avatar, menu systems and camera. All players involved in this study displayed a high degree of videogame literacy, either knowing the controls or being able to reacquaint themselves with how the game played within minutes of starting, and all

were easily able to engage in conversation about other open world action videogames during our discussions without me needing to describe or explain how other games with similar gameplay models operated (David, in fact, was able to educate me on games that I wasn't particularly familiar with, as he asked to show me another open-world action game, *Saints Row: The Third* [Volition, 2011] after our session). Controls can be a major barrier for entry into videogames for a novice player, or even an experienced player who is not familiar with a particular style of gameplay or controller. Every player showed a general understanding of how 'sandbox' games operate, and were able to discuss other similar games, either from experience or general knowledge of what these games involved.

Control of the avatar is not the sole interaction between the player and the game. The ergodic[3] nature of the videogame has been used, Rune Klevjer argues, to separate (in his terms), the 'game' from the 'computer game', and presents "'game as the discursive mode and 'computer game' as an actual cultural product" (2002, p. 193). This is to say that gameplay is often studied separately from the wider meaning of the product, and that idea of what constitutes the 'game' often leaves out elements such as cutscenes, option menus and dialog: elements proven to be of great importance to the players during this study, and particularly to their understanding of the game's narrative and their success within the game. In *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost discusses the concept of 'procedural rhetoric, "the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular" (2007, p. 3). Adam Ruch uses this concept in his own work on *GTA IV*: "there are particular meanings inscribed in a video game that only become salient when the game is actively played, tested and experienced" (2012, p.

[3] "In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text." (Aarseth, 1997, p. 1)

333). The study of games such as *GTA IV*, and the ways they work at persuading players to engage with them, requires an examination of how the game is played rather than a direct analysis of its content. During this research, player operation of menus became a part of the experience: George, in particular, spent several minutes going through the statistics screens in the pause menu, outlining his completion percentages for various tasks outlined there, and pondering on the discrepancy between his 'play-time' listed (i.e. the amount of time he had played that had been 'saved') and his actual play-time. These screens – which showed that George had achieved high completion stats within a relatively short in-game time (70% completion within 26 hours– the lowest percentage possible at completion is 56.51%,[4] and the game rewards the player for finishing in under 30 hours) seemed to be a source of some pride for him. He spent several minutes going through them, and they proved essential to his memory of how he had played the game years before, as the statistics in the menus had driven the way he digested the game's missions: he had played through them as cleanly and efficiently as he could, so as to get statistics that he was happy with. For him, an important part of his experience was how fast he was able to play through all of the game's missions and complete the 'story'.

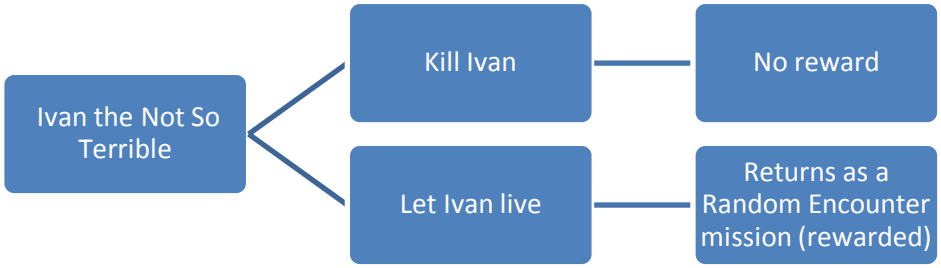
ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MISSIONS & THE MAIN STORYLINE

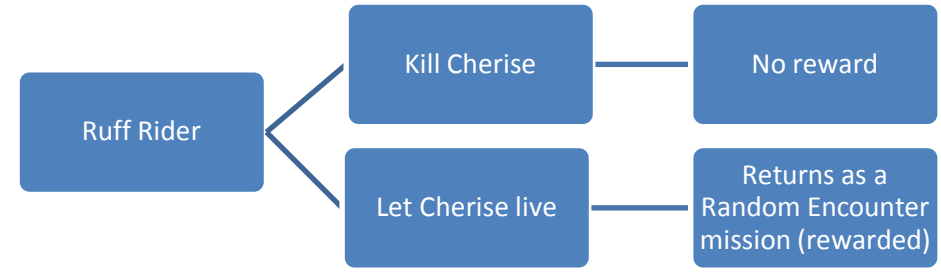
The overarching narrative of the primary missions progresses in a linear fashion, save for seven missions that allow the player to make choices that effect their outcomes, consequences, and which potentially offer up in-game benefits and content. The first three missions like this, 'Ivan The Not So Terrible', 'Ruff Rider', and 'Holland Nights', all give you a choice of whether to kill or spare the life of characters you encounter

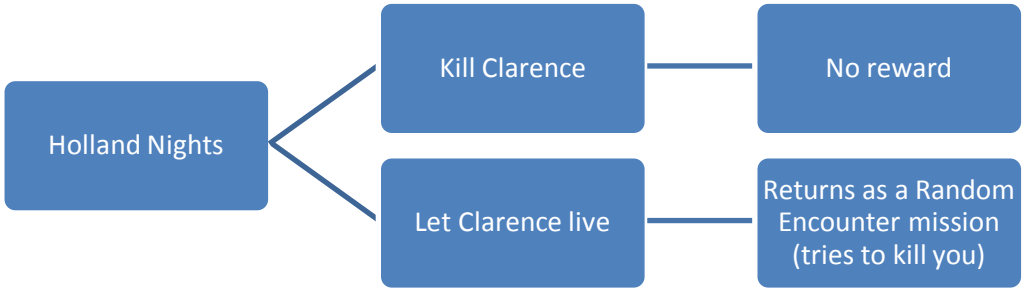
[4] According to 'HurrikaneX', writer of a 'Lowest Percentage Guide' for the game on GameFaqs (2013).

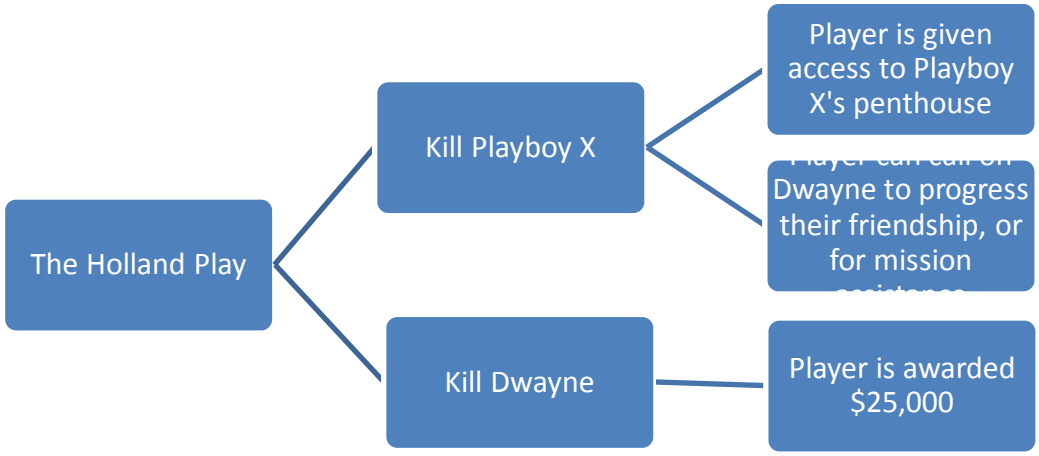
during the mission. Sparing each character gives you access to a ‘Stranger Mission’ – a separate bonus mission that only appears on the in-game map if the player is in the right place at the right time. Players who take the theoretically more virtuous path in these missions are thus rewarded by extra in-game content. The fourth and fifth missions that allow choice, ‘The Holland Play’ and ‘Blood Brothers’, both force you to choose between two men, killing one of them and sparing the other, with certain perks awarded depending on your choices (which are not made clear before the choices are made). The sixth choice, in ‘That Special Someone’, is used purely for narrative purposes, and involves either executing or sparing Darko Brevic. The most drastic difference brought about by your decision making comes in ‘The Decision’, which asks you to choose between two completely different missions, one offering a large monetary reward for working with your former nemesis Dimitri Rascalov, the other offering revenge against him. Your choice here affects which of Niko’s friends dies before the final mission, his girlfriend Kate (if you take revenge) or his cousin Roman (if you take money).

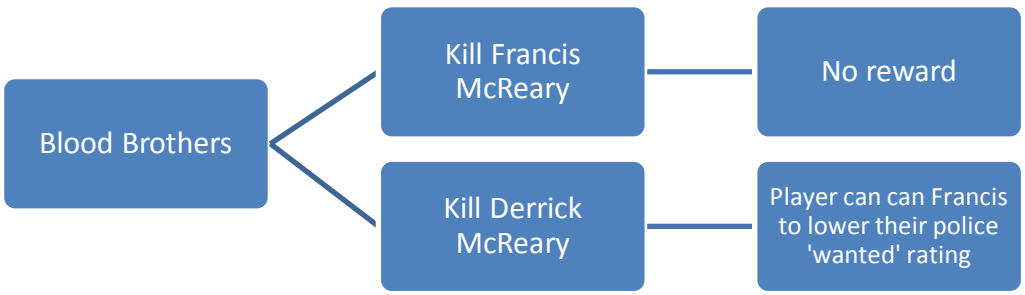
The story missions that offer choices, and have connected ramifications, fork like so:




Ruff Rider
Kill Cherise
No reward
Let Cherise live
Returns as a Random Encounter mission (rewarded)


Holland Nights
Kill Clarence
No reward
Let Clarence live
Returns as a Random Encounter mission (tries to kill you)


The Holland Play
Kill Playboy X
Player is given access to Playboy X's penthouse
Dwayne to progress their friendship, or for mission
Kill Dwayne
Player is awarded $25,000


Blood Brothers
Kill Francis McReary
No reward
Kill Derrick McReary
Player can can Francis to lower their police 'wanted' rating

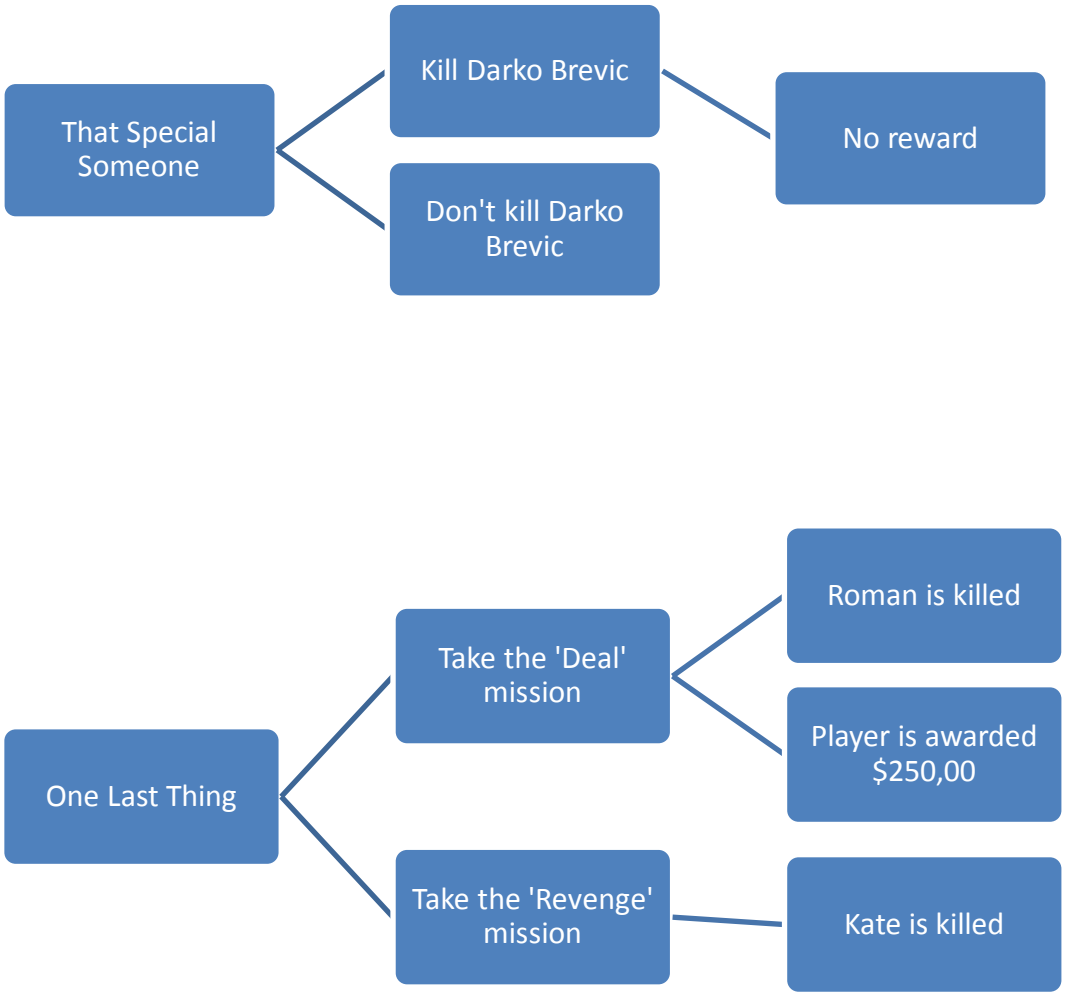


Figure 5: An illustration of the branching narrative paths in GTA IV's missions.

The 'branching narrative' model is fairly common in games; it's a way of giving the player a level of agency in the direction of the narrative, even if that means something as simple as choosing whether their character makes decisions that are morally good or bad. In some cases the player is offered rewards for certain actions, but these rewards are not made clear within the game itself. It is expected that players will make the choices they feel fit the moment best, and to try and anticipate the ramifications without

being told upfront what they will be. When discussing these choices with my participants, I tried to establish with them whether their choices were made because of what they felt was right, or whether they made choices based on what they thought best suited Niko's character. It was the final two choices that tended to prompt the most discussion, and the strongest memories of emotional attachment to narrative events, from the participants. Kyle expressed regret at his decision to kill Darko Brevic (mirroring Niko's own feelings about the act in the game), and expressed a sense of duality between himself and the avatar. When I asked him whether he felt regret because this action was not in line with how he would act, or whether he considered it out of character for Niko, he responded:

> I think it's a bit of both, actually. Especially with the narrative at the end, where Niko's like…it doesn't change anything at all. It doesn't. So I was like 'well…in the end, I should have let him live. It was right. There wasn't any point to it.'

David was more forthright in role-playing as Niko, saying that there was "moral leaning" in the choices he made, and that he tended to spare people when given the option. He attributed these decisions to his embodiment of the Niko avatar. When asked about Darko, however, he said that he chose to kill him, as he felt it was how Niko would have acted:

> I played it out for as long as I could because I wanted more of the story, and then bang. And I was thinking, actually, later on, I was thinking about that.

> Because I was being a nice guy to a large degree, and I suppose the reason was because I'm not playing me, I'm playing Niko. And that's the sort of leaning I thought he'd go towards.

There is an interesting dualism happening here: David purposely 'framed' the action for his own gratification, playing it out for as long as possible to see how the characters – including Niko – would react to the situation. But then his decision when he took action was influenced by Niko's characterization, rather than his own sense of morality. He ended the scene in a way that thematically resonated with his interpretation of the character, but there was a sense in his response that he did not want to let the character down either, and wanted to stay true to how the character had been written. Both players, having killed Darko, felt differently about it afterwards, but both also admitted that their feelings towards their actions were tied directly to Niko's characterisation more than their personal moral stances. David favoured consistency within the narrative over his own feelings towards killing the character, whereas Kyle digested the game's script and came to feel guilt over his decision.

Part of Marcus' reasoning for his choices was that keeping more characters alive would give him access to more content: "I figure someone spent the time to code the whole thing and all the voice acting and all that sort of thing, I kind of want to see everything." While David was influenced by his investment in the character, Marcus was invested in the game world, and George in his own 'perfectionist' ideals of play. Thus the 'choice' moments were significant for all three, but only David identified their importance as an issue pertaining to his relationship with the Niko avatar.

Engaging with and discussing the missions also caused the players to talk about what 'kind' of player they are, and how serious they were about their performance and skill levels. In *Play Between Worlds*, T. L. Taylor (2006, p. 68) discusses her experiences with the different levels of understanding and confusion towards elements of *Everquest,* exhibited by non-players:

> Previously, I had felt that whenever I mentioned the game to nonplayers I seemed completely off the map, that I was speaking a language they did not understand and talking about a world they could not fathom…

She goes on to reflect on her own confusion when observing discussions between 'power gamers':

> I was unable to relate to their experience of the game (…) I certainly knew which was my best weapon and set of spells, knew where to hunt, even had my eye on a new outfit to upgrade my abilities – their intent and focus had a different quality.

The gulf between the non-players, 'regular' players and 'power' gamers (the distinction between the two is now often expressed as the difference between 'casual' and 'hardcore' gamers, although these are contentious, frequently rejected terms) is not quite as severe an issue for a game like *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Although the learning curve of deciphering videogame mechanics and controller layouts can be intimidating for new players, the game is grounded within what the player recognises as an exaggerated, present-day reality. Having said that, the players interviewed for this

research are all involved, to greater or lesser degrees, within 'gamer' communities that may presuppose them to be 'power' gamers. Although George made several references to the fact that he doesn't play as much as he used to, the other subjects all represented themselves as avid, frequent gamers. This meant that terminology rarely needed to be explained to the participants, and everyone involved was aware not only of the game, but of the reception it had received, and of the legacy of the wider *Grand Theft Auto* franchise. The players participating were extremely enthusiastic about their involvement in the study. This could be attributed, in large part, to the considerable social stigma attached to videogames, and the study thereof. Dmitri Williams' essay 'Why Games Studies Now? Gamers Don't Bowl Alone' (2006) - which suggested that the popularity of Game Studies was related to an increase in play that correlated with a decline in social 'third places' outside of the home and work environment - is a solid example of the sorts of attitudes that gamers typically encounter: not particularly hostile, but still subtly suggesting that videogames are part of a 'lower' culture. There was a sense with each participant of gratitude, as though being given space to discuss their interpretations and understandings of *GTA IV*'s storyline, and how it affected the way they played, was a way of fighting against these stigmas.

For Kyle, the missions were his primary reason for enjoying the game. Kyle, despite calling himself a huge fan of *Grand Theft Auto* and owning *GTA IV* on both his PC and his Playstation 3, expressed a general disinterest in playing the game outside of the central missions:

> I actually prefer the story and the missions much more than just having a free sandbox game. It gets a little bit boring after a while…when it first

> came out, you sort of had a bit of fun for about 10 minutes just doing whatever you wanted, but after that it just sort of, 'ahhh, well…now it's the same for the rest of it'. At least in the story mode, it had a good story, I thought.

Kyle seemed to struggle with playing the game outside of the missions, asking me several times during the session whether I would prefer that he start a new game so that I could watch him play through one. Despite his obvious familiarity with the game, he asked me "I don't even know if there's anything to do after you finish the game, is there?". When asked if he'd played it much since completing all the primary missions (which he claimed to have done two days after the game came out), he replied "yeah, I've completed it a few times". This suggests that his notion of 'narrative' (a term used several times in the recruitment literature without being explicitly defined) is tied, for him, to the story established through the game's missions. It was clear that he struggled to grasp the idea that his actions independent of the missions were worthwhile for my research or attention, despite taking great pleasure recounting stories about incidents within the game and recalling anecdotes about things he found amusing in the game's geography and non-essential elements (such as the in-game radio stations).

Kyle also offered to show me other 'open world' games, including, interestingly, 2K Czech's *Mafia II*. *Mafia II* is set across an open world as well: a fictional American City called 'Empire Bay', between 1945 and 1951, and features a far more linear mission structure and far less incentive to explore the game world. Empire Bay, as a setting, is mostly used to facilitate the overarching narrative rather than encouraging players to engage with the world outside of their set tasks. There are very few 'side' missions to

take up, aside from earning money by robbing stores and stealing cars (which becomes essential to progress at a late point in the game). Again, this can be interpreted as a sign that Kyle struggled to extend his definition of 'narrative' beyond the classical mission structure.

George, meanwhile, insisted several times that I should consider reworking my thesis, making it about the *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007, 2010, 2012) trilogy. The *Mass Effect* games have been critically acclaimed for their narratives and the choices players are directly asked to make, which are frequently based around the game's 'morality' system – there are 'paragon' choices and 'renegade' choices to be made throughout the saga, which directly affect how the story plays out and the characterisation of your avatar. His insistence exemplifies a different understanding, and a different set of ideas, of how 'narrative' should be studied. Interactivity, as Andy Cameron (1995) puts it, "implies forking paths (…) the greater the number of pathways, the greater the sense of textual play for the reader, and the greater amount of work for the writer". The *Mass Effect* series makes these forks explicit within its gameplay, narrative model, and consequently its marketing strategy. On the website for the third game in the trilogy, the importance of the narrative's branching structure is made clear: "Experience the beginning, middle, and end of an emotional story unlike any other, where the decisions you make completely shape your experience and outcome" (*masseffect.bioware.com*, accessed June 2015). Although players are still able to fill the story in within their own heads, Mass Effect is quite explicit in its desire to make sure that your every action is part of a singular, preferably canonical narrative that carries through the trilogy. The activities that can be partaken in outside of the primary missions are explicitly woven into the grander narrative of the trilogy; the game does not encourage or allow the sort of player-

driven digressions that *GTA IV* does. In contrast, David offered to show me Volition, Inc.'s *Saints Row: The Third*, an open world game that provides far more in the way of ludicrous activities to perform outside of the missions – to him, the value of discussing these games largely centered around showing what he could achieve outside of the mission boundaries.

Much of *GTA IV* is left open for player interpretation and interaction. Every participant approached the terms 'narrative' and 'story' differently when addressing the game's events. When prompted to elaborate on what the word 'story' meant to him in relation to *GTA IV*, Barry replied:

> The way the characters unfold and they develop, and the way the situations develop. Some of the people you have to meet and interact with, like with the whole girlfriend system and the buddy system, all that kind of stuff, and the choices at the end. That's the story to me.

Henry Jenkins contends that games often "depend on our familiarity with the roles and goals of genre entertainment to orient us with the action" (2004, p. 119), while Mayra and Ermi posit that players "bring their desires, expectations and previous experiences with them, and interpret and reflect the (gameplay) experience in that light" (2005, p. 2).

The plot of *GTA IV* is complex enough that the participants were unable to recall the full extent of the story explicitly told through the game's missions. Although the participants all remembered many details from the game's plot, regardless of how long

it was since they last played it, some of them had forgotten major aspects or misremembered certain parts. When I asked Barry about a choice he had made at the end, he unwittingly recalled an ending he had viewed online rather than the one he had encountered when he played the game himself. Interestingly, he singled out the events he misremembered as particularly impactful: "storywise, the thing that really hit home was, in my play through Roman got killed at his wedding". When I later quizzed him on details of his account that didn't ring true, he realized his error:

> Oh, sorry, and…that was the reason I killed that guy then! Yeah, sorry, that was it. My bad. It's because I've seen both endings on Youtube, and I must have just gotten them mixed up. But no, I definitely killed the bad guy, which means that Niko's girlfriend got killed.

For Barry the experience of, and immersion in, the game's 'plot' wasn't entirely tied in with the act of playing through the game himself. Although the time he spent playing is essential to his understanding of the significance of the events he recalled, the outcome of his own actions has been retroactively ignored in favour of the ending he considers more shocking. As Bernadette Flynn puts it, "it is a mistake to think that there is only one type of player experience or form of engagement" (2004, p. 52). Barry arrived at his understanding of the tragic events of one of the game's potential finales not through his own play experience, but through a viewing of a video of someone else traversing it, and had remembered that as a climactic moment in the game he played.

David similarly, did not remember the full consequences of his choice, remembering who lived rather than who died at the end of the game:

James: Do you remember who died at the end?

David: Um…Dimitri died?

James: Depending on which mission you pick, one of your allies dies…

David: Oh…..which friends?

James: It's either his girlfriend Kate or his cousin Roman.

David: (immediately) Roman lived. Roman lived.

Several years after playing through the mission where one of these characters dies, neither Barry nor David could recall the specifics of what happened in this moment in their first play through of the game. They remember the outcomes the game features, whether they experienced them in their own games or not, but the actions that lead to these outcomes, and their motives for the choices they made, are effectively marginalised.

When asked about the game's tone, and whether they considered the game's script to be 'funny' or not, the players all gave responses that seemed to correspond with the ways in which they had been playing the game. Barry's understanding of the game, and his interactions within it, was affected by his understanding of the game's tonal duality. When asked whether he'd categorise the game as being either comedic or dramatic, he replied:

Actually, it was the first game that I came across that actually kind of did both. And because it was my first experience with a game in the series, I

> thought did well with both. Because it opens up with one of the guys on the boat just getting spanked by a prostitute, basically, and then, it cuts to Niko, and Niko's, you know, an immigrant on this boat entering the country illegally, and it kind of hits both tones kind of well. It sets up that this game is supposed to be a satire, it's supposed to make fun of how society is today, but then there's also Niko who's trying to get a new start on life, and shit keeps coming down on him basically.

The players were divided on whether this dissonance between tones and representation made Niko difficult to understand as a character, and whether this created inconsistencies in their interactions with the game world. Barry saw this as a flaw in the game's writing:

> I thought that…there was more of an inconsistency with Niko's character, because Niko was always: 'I'm trying to be a better man here; now let's go steal some cars and go shoot people'…all that kind of stuff, I thought that was a bit inconsistent.

Kyle, however, thought that the game was more effective at mixing elements of comedy and drama, although he still felt that there was a way to keep these elements distinct from each other:

I think it has funny moments. I think the big difference, because people try to compare it to *Saints Row,*[5] which I don't think is a good comparison. People are like 'it's not…it used to be fun, but now it's not'. It's like, I went to play *Grand Theft Auto III* the other day, because I got it for my iPhone, um, it's not…it's never been straight-out funny. It's always been a serious game with funny elements. Like, satire, parody to it. Like the fake 'America's Next Top Hooker' ads and all that stuff. It's never been just about crazy funny stuff that happens. And that's what this *Saints Row* is about, it's not the same thing. So I like it that it does have funny bits to it, but it's not set around being stupid. Which is why I thought they should have had an extra mode, call it 'Stupid Mode' or something, where you can have all that stupid, crazy stuff. You know, launch cars across towns or whatever.

One of the more interesting responses to the dissonance came from David, who compared his reasoning through the issue to solving a puzzle. The word 'puzzle' appeared three times during our discussion. The first incident occurred when I asked about his driving:

James: I see you're driving quite carefully here as well, do you usually play like that?

David: I try to. It's part of the puzzle, you know? You try to do as minimal

[5] The *Saints Row* series, published by THQ, is infamous for its considerably bawdier take on open world action gameplay and narrative.

damage as you can, because the cars explode and shit as well.

Then again when I asked him about his approach to the game's 'friendship' system:

James: Do you bother around much with the friendship stuff, or did you only play it through the first time?

David: Aw, a little bit.

James: Was that at all dependant on which characters you actually liked?

David: Aw, largely it was the puzzle. It was 'why do I want to do this' and 'what's going on'.

And again when I asked him about the choices he made when asked to kill or spare characters:

James: All those moments in the game when you have a choice between killing someone or letting them live, where did you go with that?

David: Generally I let them live. But what I'll tend to do…again, I treat it more like the puzzle in the storyline. It's like, if I do this, this could be the

> fallout, and this could be the ramifications, if I do that, you know…and if it's the 'save him', that could become more interesting, if there's any fallout from that, or you could just shoot him and see what happens, you know? It's that sort of thing.

The 'puzzle' metaphor is applied here to moments that may have lasting ramifications for the characters, but also, in the first quote, to moments that don't actually feed into the game's primary narrative; rather, David's approach to the broader game was influenced by what he observed during the moments in which a story was explicitly being told. As Henry Jenkins (2004, p. 124) puts it, stories that are told spatially – that is, stories that are "held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts and pushed forward by the character's movement across the map" – are "dismissed as episodic…(each episode) can be compelling on its own terms without contributing significantly to the plot development". In this case, the events and dialog contained within separate 'episodes' of gameplay have significantly altered David's perception of the broader game, both within and outside of the designated missions. Adam Ruch's description of the way a game narrative operates describes part of the relationship between these modes of understanding:

> In a video game, events are contingent and so narrative can be made up of a selection of different textual elements in different orders. So, while it is fair to say a narrative may form throughout the play experience, one cannot divorce the narrative from the situated play experience (2012, p. 334).

David's response is an interesting one, in that it is at odds with much of the criticism leveled against the game's perceived sense of dissonance. By evoking the 'puzzle' metaphor, David puts the onus on himself to maintain a certain consistency within the game; the objective of his gameplay experience goes beyond simply completing the missions in the ways the game requests, and extends into the way he maintains the integrity of the script's characterisation when Niko is in his control.

Although ultimately David's 'puzzle' provided a guideline more than a strict set of rules, it was none the less reminiscent of how some players engage with games by setting challenges that, in their opinion, are more consistent with how the game world and the characters within it should operate. One user of *Gamefaqs,* a popular website that correlates user created and submitted playguides, cheats and message boards, has created a 'Niko Pacifist Challenge', which is aimed at "hardcore GTA4 player that could use a fresh perspective on the game" (Redding, 2008). The guide is designed to help players finish the game with the minimum number of kills (42, according to author Michael Redding) while committing as few crimes as possible. Redding doesn't explicitly state within his guide that this is intended as a role-playing exercise, but he does admit that part of his original motivation was the possibility that there was an alternate ending for killing as few people as possible – evidence that his challenge was, in at least some small way, motivated by the narrative.

George had a different reaction to Niko's character, complaining that the character did not leave him feeling empowered in the ways he felt he should be. He said that he much preferred the older games in the series, as he believed that their free-roaming elements gave him a sense of empowerment that he felt was missing from *GTA IV*:

> Once you had finished the story aspects and became engaged with them, you became engaged with the world itself. And therefore, it was fun to explore, with absurd vehicles and weaponry and such. I guess the world (in *GTA IV*) feels rather cold, and even though I've finished the game I don't feel very empowered? Which I guess is one thing the other games had, you know, they give you a sense of empowerment.

He acknowledged that this lack of 'empowerment' was in line with the game's central themes and philosophy:

> James: But do you think in terms of this game's plot, you're not meant to come away as empowered-
>
> George: No, you're not meant to. And I guess it's all, everything's intentional. But from a gameplay aspect, and a sense of me wanting to return, not simply because of the story but because of the the free-roam aspects…it was lessened significantly.

Because the narrative put forward by the missions contrasted with George's expectations, his enjoyment of the gameplay experience outside of the missions suffered. Empowerment is easily attainable for the *GTA IV* player; George's stats screen revealed that he had used no cheats, which could have given him access to, among other things, powerful weapons, full ammo, and his choice of vehicles.

Even without cheating the avatar is, in truth, extremely powerful by the game's end. George's grievance seemed to be tied directly to his perception of the character of Niko, and his place within the game world as dictated by the missions, rather than the actual abilities afforded to his avatar.

Interesting, George's play style changed at the conclusion of our interview, once I turned my recording device off. While I spoke to him, he openly pondered whether it would be more interesting to 'go on a rampage' or complete a mission, opting to try and complete one of the game's assassination side-missions. He spent a lot of time on this mission, eventually failing it, and much of the rest of the time he spoke to me was spent driving around aimlessly. Once the focus was taken off of our study, his play style changed. He continued playing, intentionally provoking police chases, attacking pedestrians, and asking me to play the game with him, swapping the controller back and forth.

This, combined with George's continued insistence that I should have been studying *Mass Effect*, suggests a great deal about his interpretation of the role of narrative and story-telling in this game; even when explicitly encouraged to do as he pleased, when he knew his actions were being recorded and discussed for the purposes of a thesis focused on narrative, he avoided aspects of play that could not be reasonably justified as part of Niko's characterisation, or the broader story that he inhabited. The very concept of narrative was enough for him to tailor his play style in a particular way, despite being told that there was absolutely no need to do so. This suggests, despite his general apathy towards the game, that the primary narrative told through the missions in *GTA IV* had a profound effect on

the way George played the game, and his expectations of what I would want to see from him. This is despite the fact that, when asked, George only recalled what he called the 'key aspects' of the plot:

> George: I'd say I do remember the key aspects of it. I mean, obviously I've completed the story. Umm…..and I remember standout missions and such….obviously the bank heist and things like that, and I remember…there was…were there two guys you had to choose between?
>
> James: Yeah, there was. Do you remember which one you chose in that mission?
>
> George: Uhhhh….I….I think…the more urban guy, I think? The younger guy.

His choice, he assured me, was made for the sake of gameplay rather than narrative, as killing the 'more urban guy' (Playboy X) yields what he deemed a superior in-game reward (another 'safe house', in which the player can save their game, change Niko's clothes, and watch television):

> James: So you got the apartment?
>
> George: Yeah. I think, to be honest, I may have tried both of them or checked it online while I was doing it…

James: So you don't think you would have made your decision based on who *should* die, it was more about the in-game rewards?

George: Because one of them was quite…he was quite emo, wasn't he? Nah, I think it was conscious of what's best for me. Any game where there are choices you can make which have a lasting, significant impact on the gameplay, like what's available to you down the track…I'm very concerned with? My nature as a person who's a perfectionist, I don't like making a wrong choice. So…when there's something where I can do something and I won't ever be able to change my decision, and I'll never be able to make the perfect decisions, I'm very concerned.

Discussing this same choice in his third play through of the game, Marcus showed that his evaluation of the situation was largely reliant on his understanding of what Niko would do:

This time I decided – because you get the choice, you have to kill either Dwayne or Playboy X…and every time I played, for some reason I chose Dwayne, because he was down on his luck and Playboy had money. And as far as Niko was concerned, Playboy had more business potential. Then by the time you killed Dwayne, Playboy revoked you as his friend. But then if you go the other way round you end up getting a cool penthouse.

When observed and asked about their reactions and experiences with the role of narrative, as they understood it, during *GTA IV*'s missions, it became clear that the participants in this study had all been influenced differently by the story they absorbed by way of completing the game. They all came into their sessions with me with different perceptions of how Niko's character could or should affect how they played the game. By examining the ways in which these players reacted to the primary narrative told through the game's missions, we are able to get a better understanding of the 'non-canon' actions explored in Chapter IV. Participants' reactions to my questions exemplify the different approaches each of them take to the concept of 'narrative'; for some it's a term used primarily to discuss the storyline rather than to discuss the events that emerge as a result of their play within the game world. Issues relating to narrative dissonance are dealt with or criticised depending on the participant's taste and investment, and ultimately each participant expressed different interpretations and ideas that stemmed from their completion of the game's missions.

CHAPTER IV: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PLAYER & THE AVATAR

> The times I identified most with Niko were not during the game's frequent cutscenes, which drop bombs of "meaning" and "narrative importance" with nuclear delicacy, but rather when I watched him move through the world of Liberty City and projected onto him my own guesses as to what he was thinking and feeling.
>
> Tom Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Videogames Matter*, 2010, p. 169.

The morally panicked rhetoric that has followed the *Grand Theft Auto* series has largely focused on a perceived confusion between the fantasy of the game and the reality of the outside world, but the potential relationships that can emerge between player and avatar are not so simple or crass. During a game session, the player may experience a complication in their concept of their 'self', between the real self, the virtual self, and the projected self. Put simply, the distinction between what the player is doing and what the avatar is doing can be a difficult one to make, even if the player is in no danger of 'mistaking' the avatar for themselves. This chapter examines the varying degrees to which the participants in this study became invested in the character of Niko during play, how they expressed a sense of identity and ownership of actions while being observed, and ultimately how their relationship to the avatar affected their play experience. The impact of the bond between player and avatar can exemplify how players reason through and rationalise characterisation and arrive at unique conclusions

and connections.

The nature of the relationship between the player and the avatar has often been discussed in fairly shallow terms, despite often being quite complex. Mark Stephen Meadows calls the avatar "a social creature, dancing on the border between fiction and fact" (2007, p. 16) – this blurring of lines is important, as the relationships between players and their avatars are not binary, shifting on a person by person, game by game basis. A player does not simply become their character, or form any singular specific connection with the on-screen figure. The participants involved in this study displayed numerous different understandings of the link between themselves and the Niko Bellic avatar in *Grand Theft Auto IV*. While some felt a sense of disconnect, or didn't want to identify with the character as part of the play process, others integrated an element of 'role-playing' into their experience, trying to recreate a style of interaction in line with their understanding of how the character would approach different situations.

The discussion around the avatar/player relationship is often framed through an understanding of what it is to be 'immersed' in an experience; the player's ability to remain autonomous and represent themselves and their thoughts through the play experience is often ignored. Our understanding of identification is further complicated by the prevalence of Huizinga's 'Magic Circle' metaphor; as Altuğ Işığan notes, "assumptions of transparency and the player's effective merging with screen space remain problematic" (2013), and the player remains part spectator even as they directly control their avatar. The 'circle' is useful as a tool for framing how game experiences have been thought about and conceptualised, but has been

applied, in the past, in ways that have greatly oversimplified the relationship between the player and the game. Salen and Zimmerman put forward the claim that there is a "distinct boundary" (2003, p. 94) established by the act of play, one that is put in place by the 'rules' of the game. The metaphor suggests that 'play' and 'real' spaces are separate, even if we accept the 'boundary' as porous rather than solid. While the 'Magic Circle' is perhaps useful when explaining play as a concept, it makes less sense when applied stringently: there is little evidence to suggest that the player simply closes outside influences out during gameplay. Darryl Woodford's 'Abandoning the Magic Circle' (2008) provides evidence of how this metaphor has been problematised:

> This idea of a different magic circle, or having no play element at all, is not useful: either when designing or studying games. We must examine the game as an entity, not throw out entire groups of players because they do not fit within our model image of what a player should be, of what a game should be. They exist within the space demarcated for play, thus their participation and contribution must be considered as valid as those who do fit an ideal.

Discussion in this area needs to move on from simplistic understandings of how players interact with and experience games. The nature of the relationship between the player and the game is quite complex, steeped not only in issues of characterisation, choice and ethics, but also in real-world politics and history, and differs significantly on a player by player basis. In this chapter I intend to examine the relationships formed and exhibited by my informants with their avatars. I argue

that the discourse around these relationships has been so intent on proving or disproving a very specific form of identification that nuanced discussion has not properly emerged. I will be examining the ways in which my participants did or didn't invest in the character of Niko, and in the game world. The game's representation of an exaggerated reality leads to a complex mix of destructive potential and social norms that the player is encouraged to observe. I questioned the players on specific choices they made, and observed issues of embodiment that arose. In an open world action title, the player is making constant choices about actions with obvious real world analogous actions; this is one of the game's primary sources of pleasure for the player. What emerges throughout this discussion is a series of complex relationships, which are not easily defined or able to be contained within a singular hypothesis.

IDENTIFYING THE 'SELF' DURING PLAY

It is possible for one's sense of 'self' to be pulled in multiple directions during a gameplay experience, although this is not as simple as a person 'becoming' the character they're playing, or having the character perfectly act out the player's intentions. 'Identity' is a somewhat loaded term – the concept of the 'self' has been a "unifying construct within psychology, sociology, and other social and behavioural sciences" (Leary & Tangney, 2003, p. 3) since the 1970s. Dorothée Hefner, Christoph Klimmt, and Peter Vorderer posit that media identification has rarely been applied to games, and that the discussions in the area are inadequate: "current theories envision the 'self' and self-concept not anymore as a stable construct but rather as state-sensitive and malleable depending on the situation",

(2007, p. 40), they state. When the player controls an avatar that is forced to make choices (whether complex choices, or choices as simple as turning left or right), there can emerge a tension between the player's sense of what the right way forward is, and their sense of how the character will react to events. This will be discussed further in this chapter with specific references made to choices faced by my participants.

James Paul Gee (2004) makes some useful distinctions by splitting the identities involved in play into three categories: virtual, real, and projective. The 'projective' identity, Gee elaborates, is about "seeing the virtual character as one's own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want the character to be and become" (p. 55). This is helpful as a basic understanding of how the concept of identity can be skewed by the play experience, although Gee's categories perhaps oversimplify the potential range of relationships between player and avatar. The 'trajectory' and 'aspirations' that the player imposes over their character do not necessarily match up well with the 'reality' of what happens on the screen: the virtual self must be adaptive, which requires a certain level of competence from the 'real' self. The projective self is rarely able to achieve perfect harmony with these two senses of identity, other than in intent. Gee also makes the claim that players will often replay certain scenes in games because they feel as though they "let their character down" (p. 57) with their performance, an observation that resonates in an interesting way with what George had to say about choosing when to save or reload his game:

> As a perfectionist by nature I tend not to do things that will have too many negative repercussions when I'm actually going to save the game. The way I play the game is to…you know, better myself. I guess it's perhaps a greedy way of playing the game, but, you know. It depends, the story is…in reality, you couldn't just die and get arrested as many times as you do. I'm just going to play in a way that's only positive for me. I don't need that extra stress in my life, I play the game to relax and unwind, not to have to deal with cops chasing me down.

Gee's observation matches George's experience, but while Gee is trying to frame this as a 'projective' experience in which the player has let down the character, George sees it as an experience where he has let himself down. This is a pertinent example of how the literature in this area, while useful in the broad observations it makes, is often prescriptive about certain behaviours that will not necessarily be observed or consistent with the experience of every player. At the Foundations of Digital Games conference in 2013, Daniel Vella presented a paper that presented the player/avatar relationship in simple terms:

> Philosophical models of embodied phenomenology and naratological theories of character are drawn upon in order to propose an understanding of the avatar as a 'frame' that structures the player's relation to the gameworld in such a way that playing becomes not only playing as oneself, but also *playing as* a character (2013).

This simplifies the relationship between player and avatar by emphasising a two-part process of embodiment as both the self and the character simultaneously, which understates the fluidity of the player's role. This is typical for discussions around the avatar figure: Mark Stephen Meadows' definition of an 'avatar' as "an interactive, social representation of a user" (2007, p. 13) is another example. James Newman, in his argument against 'interactivity', states that "Characters On-Line are embodied as sets of available capabilities and capacities. They are equipment to be utilised in the game-world by the player. They are vehicles" (2002). While it is true that this can be the case for some players – indeed, this matches up well with what one of my subjects, George, said during conversations discussed later in this chapter – this is a statement that paints all gameplay experiences and all players with the same brush. To suggest that Niko was simply a 'vehicle' for every player would be to ignore the connection that David, in particular, had with the character (as discussed in Chapter III, in relation to David's 'puzzle' metaphor). This also ignores the work of the game's writers to establish Niko as a character in his own right, one that players are encouraged to get a sense of. Admittedly, the use of a single avatar here may in some cases prevent connections from being formed – as my participants were white men, they may be more inclined to identify with an avatar that also presents as a white man than players of different genders or ethnicities might – but still, the connections my participants formed are worth considering.

In psychoanalysis, there is much discussion on the nature of 'knowing' someone. Robert Waelder stated in 1960 that "(our) knowledge of psychic process in another

person…there is no doubt that such knowledge exists and is constantly at the bottom of human relationships" (1960, p. 20). Naturally, the stakes are entirely different within the relationship between player and avatar – the player is more likely to run the risk of dissatisfaction than genuine upset if their sense of an important figure's 'self' is compromised – but the participants certainly made attempts to understand Niko as a character as well as an avatar. David's play style, in particular, was extremely cautious – he tried to drive safely and avoid running people over, despite the game offering little penalty for doing so (especially outside of missions, where often the purpose of a session can be to create mischief).

Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p. 453) deal with self-conceptualisation during play through their discussion of the 'immersive fallacy': the idea that while the player can "exert him or herself into an imagery world" through an avatar, "at the same time, the character is a tool, a puppet, an object for the player to manipulate according to the rules of the game". They state that "the player is fully aware of the character as an artificial construct". This is perhaps closer to capturing what emerged from the play sessions I witnessed, but the concept of 'awareness' is interesting: I observed in some players what seemed to be a lack of awareness in how they were negotiating the relationship between themselves and their avatars, and actions that directly contradicted statements they made about the nature of this relationship, as I will discuss further in this chapter. In any case, to simply say that a player has a specific form of relationship with the avatar, and to present it as absolute, would be inaccurate not simply on a player by player basis, but on a session by session, potentially minute by minute basis. Players are not hard locked into their relationships with their avatars, and can betray the relationships they

believe they have established.

MORAL PANICS

The concept of a relationship between the player and the characters or gameplay experience in *Grand Theft Auto IV* is complicated by the panics surrounding the game's violent, profane content. There is a considerable moral panic around the idea that the connection between the player and avatars that are "exemplars of depravity" (Konzack, 2007, p. 114) can lead to players re-enacting scenes from the game in real life, a concept that the players interviewed for this thesis tended to dismiss as insulting. Whilst Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson rightfully dismiss "the defending of games as a cultural form" (2008, p. 6) as redundant, this particular game, and the other *Grand Theft Auto* games in the series, have still sparked responses that act as either a defence or condemnation of the game. In the introduction, I discussed how *Grand Theft Auto V* has been removed from sale in certain Australian retailers for fear of how it may normalise violence against women: concerns at the content of this series are still extremely prevalent. Speaking in defence of the game, Ben Hourigan (2008) of the Institute of Public Affairs argues that "psychologically healthy individuals will feel uncomfortable about having others know they had done these things for fun, even in a virtual world", and that the game can be used as "a tool for exploring the limits of our morality when the consequences are limited, and learning what our consciences dictate in situations where we will not be punished for doing wrong." These are not views that are shared by everyone though, and the question of whether or not *Grand Theft Auto* games are harmful has affected the discourse around the player/avatar

relationship.

The *GTA* series has often been equated to a murder simulator, one with the potential to teach players how to kill, in a similar way to how many shooters have been accused of being part of a 'military-entertainment complex' of games "released for military training, commercial sale, and recruitment purposes". (Thompson, 2009, p. 92) It is perhaps, in part, this history of videogames that have actively encouraged military involvement, such as America's Army and Marine Doom (a licensed mod of Doom designed for the U.S. Marines in the mid-90s) that has led to fears of videogames being used as training tools for the activities that appear within them (Penny, 2004, p. 75). The *GTA* series has been blamed for numerous incidents by both the media and the perpetrators of crimes committed. The parents of Will and Josh Buckner, two teenage stepbrothers in Tennessee, tried to sue Rockstar North after the pair blamed an incident in which they shot at moving cars (killing one man and wounding a woman) on *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, although the case was eventually dismissed by their attorneys (Kushner, 2012, p. 156). This is not uncommon: the killing of a taxi driver in Thailand by teenager Polwat Chino was attributed to the boy's experiences with *GTA IV*, prompting a hold on sales of the game in the country (Bloom, 2008), and in 2013 an eight year-old in Louisiana shot the elderly caregiver watching him after playing the game (Russell, 2013). Defenders of the series frequently mention that the game's open-ended nature does allow some scope for activities that are, in some way, worthy of merit. Speaking about the moral panics surrounding the release of *GTA III*, Henry Jenkins notes that "nothing stops you from stealing an ambulance and racing injured people to the hospital or grabbing a fire truck and putting out blazes or simply walking around

town" (Jenkins, 2002) (interestingly the actual act of theft is largely marginalised). *GTA IV* allows you to hunt down criminals found through the computers in stolen police cars, but this is, quite obviously, not an inherently noble or valiant act.

Policy making and media coverage related to videogames has largely been influenced by the nature of interactivity, and the idea that being put in direct control of a character is more likely to result in imitation of their actions than if they are depicted in other media. In Australia, the treatment of videogames by local political bodies, and the laws in place that have prevented the sale of certain content, has codified how avid and informed Australian videogame players relate to, engage with and discuss videogames with controversial subject matter. Former South Australian Attorney General Michael Atkinson, in his opposition against Australia introducing an 'adults only' R18+ classification for videogames, made an argument not atypical of the classical association between videogames and violence:

> The interactive nature of electronic games means that they have a much greater influence than viewing a movie does. People are participating and 'acting-out' violence and criminal behaviour when they are playing a video game. They are essentially rehearsing harmful behaviour. Children and vulnerable adults (such as those with a mental illness) can be harmed by playing video games with violence, sex, and criminal activity (Parker, 2009).

Most of the participants in this study showed some degree of awareness of these moral panics, and had clearly given thought to what effect, if any, their interactions with the game world through Niko were having on them. Rhetoric around the potential impact that these games have is particularly potent in Australia; an R18+ rating for videogames was not introduced by the local classification authorities until 2013, and both *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* were briefly banned from sale due to sexual content. The then-named Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) refused GTA III from classification because of content that they believed could be classified as 'sexual violence':

> However during the game the player is able to pick up prostitutes in the red light District. The player and the prostitute can then drive to a park, where the car will rock back and forth in a suggestion of sexual activity. As the rocking continues the player's health will increase and the balance of the player's funds will decrease. After a short time the rocking stops and the prostitute gets out of the car. The player is able to chase the prostitute on foot or in the vehicle, and can strike the prostitute with the car and/or any weapons including fists, feet and baseball bat. An attack on a prostitute can include savage kicks and blood sprays - as for attacks on any other characters in the game. Once the prostitute has been beaten to an unresponsive state and is lying in a pool of blood, the player can take her money (presumably including the amount paid for sex).
>
> In the view of the majority of the Board, the violence the player can inflict on the prostitute, can be conceptually linked to the sexual activity which

> precedes it. The player has the option of bashing and killing a woman with whom he has just had sex (Refused-classification.com, accessed July 2014).

These moral panics have stymied and simplified discussions around identification with the avatar. The rhetoric has, for a long time, operated under an assumed agenda – to either prove or disprove that controlling a violent avatar, and enacting horrors upon virtual worlds and people, is liable to cause psychological damage or spur players to recreate their actions. In 2000, Mark Finn noted that much of the coverage around games, in both the media and academia, had "focussed on the perceived danger games pose to the young mind, whether that danger be physical (in terms of bodily atrophy due to inactivity) or social (in terms of anti-social and even violent behaviour, caused by exposure to specific types of content)" (Finn, 2000). This focus has made a noticeable impact on how discussions have been rendered.

The *Grand Theft Auto* series has been mired by court cases and accusations that have shifted conversations into either defensiveness or condemnation by necessity. Henry Jenkins, discussing his 'ambush' interview on Donahue regarding the content of *Grand Theft Auto III*, outlined the frustrating ways in which the discussion had been limited by the rather simple ways in which violent games have been considered:

> I wanted to tell them about what I learned when I went around the country talking to teens about school violence – that the adults were focused in the wrong places if what they wanted to do was to stop kids from hurting each

> other. I wanted to talk about the importance of media literacy education not simply for teens but for their parents (Jenkins, 2002).

Jenkins hints here at the way the issue of 'identity' has been compromised when considering these games – the focus from academics and journalists has largely been on the issue of violence, and the singular question of whether the players identify with the world and characters in a way that prompts them to re-enact what they see on the screen.

Partly as a result of these moral panics and social norms, many players are less concerned with the process of identification itself, but rather how their engagement and enjoyment with these games affect their social identities. While 'gaming' is recognised as a popular hobby, the term 'gamers' continues to be used to identify social groups of individuals who play games, and the term, despite moderate social progress away from the 'gamer' stereotype, still carries some degree of stigma. Journalist Simon Parkin has expounded that the term 'gamer' "is a miserable legacy of the medium's niche past, where video games were viewed as the sole preserve of white, western *indoors-y* teenagers" (2013), and argues that the continued stigma detracts numerous players from identifying as such. All of my participants were men (although they were not all Caucasian, and none of them were teenagers), and although the word 'gamer' came up rarely in our discussions they had been recruited from gaming message boards, or from social networking accounts on which they identified themselves as regular game players. 'Social identity theory' posits that "people's knowledge of their in-group and out-group and the way these are evaluated has an effect on self-image and action" (Dashtipour, 2009, p. 320). There was a general sense, with some participants, that they

wanted to be involved in this study because they saw academic interest in videogames as an acknowledgement of the worth of their own self-identification as 'gamers'.

Of the players interviewed for this thesis, Marcus seemed most aware of the issues caused by moral panics, and most wary of defending his position as a player of *Grand Theft Auto* games. At the end of our session, when I asked if there was anything else he would like to say about the game while the recorder was running, he replied:

> There's one thing I will say about the game, is that everyone said 'it's a game about killing hookers and just murdering people'. But I mean…playing this game now, I haven't felt the urge to go around killing people. The game hasn't forced me to go on a murdering rampage. I mean, if people want to do that, the option's there. That's the beauty of sandbox games. You can do everything, and it's a game so there's no real consequences – ha, I said that as I was running over someone – ummm, but, it's one of those things.

He also related an anecdote – one he attributed to "a game journo or something" – about someone who had let their "two or three year old son" play the game:

> And his son just went around driving, obeying the traffic laws, letting people out, just being…just driving around the city. Because that's what he wanted to do. The game doesn't throw any of that sort of thing in your face. It doesn't say, you know…'here's a guy, why don't you kill him?'. People

are just standing around doing their own thing.

Marcus was evidently keen to distance his own actions from the rhetoric surrounding the title, and making it clear that the game was not triggering violent impulses in him. This is an engrained reaction from many game players who feel the need to either justify or defend their hobby. At another point, Marcus stated: "what I love about the game, why I've played it for so long, is…it's kind of like playing with LEGO for an adult. You're only limited by your imagination." Marcus' insistence that his pleasure from the game didn't come from violent activities wasn't consistent with the way he played – he killed many characters during my observation – but the way he spoke of the game exhibited a clear concern for these panics, and a keenness to distance himself from the actions he performed while playing.

Grand Theft Auto has been central to many of the media's attacks against videogames and the people who play them. The comparatively complex characterisation of the characters in *GTA IV* feels like a response, in many ways, to these criticisms. The central violence of *Grand Theft Auto IV* is explored through the game's overarching narrative, as conveyed through the primary missions and cut scenes – regardless of the ending the player gets, Niko will lament the decisions he has made and hint towards a great sense of dissatisfaction at how things have panned out.

INVESTMENT IN THE CHARACTER

To understand the relationship the participants had formed with Niko as a character, and as an avatar, it was essential to talk about 'investment' – how much they cared about the

established characterisation, and whether they were bothered by the ludonarrative dissonance cited by many critics. This is a broad issue across many games: Veli-Matti Karhulahti identifies conflict a player may experience over character identification:

> Because of the more or less determined structure of each scripted storyline there is nevertheless constantly a potential clash between what the player may want the character to do and what the author has scripted for the player. Whereas limiting the variety of available choices and actions directs the player to implement the specific choices and actions that advance the story, these limitations simultaneously threaten the player's identification with the player character and so also her or his sense of acting in the story situation (2012, p. 2).

In the case of a game like *Grand Theft Auto IV*, it can be argued that the actions of Niko during gameplay sequences are at odds with the character presented through cutscenes and dialogue. Niko never expresses a desire to commit unprovoked atrocities, yet the player is able to do so (a criticism that Rockstar seem particularly aware of in *Grand Theft Auto V*, in which one character, Trevor, is portrayed as a homicidal maniac). Barry agreed with the argument that Niko's character didn't always suit the game's design philosophies, and felt that the characterisation of Luis, the protagonist of *GTA IV* expansion 'The Ballad of Gay Tony', was more consistently in line with how he wanted to play the game:

> I thought that…there was more of an inconsistency with Niko's character,

> because Niko was always: 'I'm trying to be a better man here; now let's go steal some cars and go shoot people'…all that kind of stuff, I thought that was a bit inconsistent. But with Luis, not so much. He wasn't trying to reinvent himself. I mean…he had a better job and all that sort of stuff, but he still associated with all these troublemakers and stuff, whereas Niko was trying not to, but when you played as him, you kind of did it anyway.

I questioned whether his actions made him feel any sense of regret, and whether or not he tried to frame his actions as 'suitable' for Niko or not:

> Umm…nah, not really. In a game like this where the character's already established…I mean, like, I can kinda just…I don't really have to feel regret or anything like that, because, like…the character feels that way, not me particularly. Whereas in a role-playing game, I would feel that regret, because it's my choice. When it's Niko it's like, eh, whatever.

And when I asked him how he felt about Niko being able to run over pedestrians, he said:

> I can accept that I did that. And I'm like 'god, that would have really hurt' or something like that, because the way the game is built it's meant to look realistic, and people look like they're in pain. But I just…I don't really feel

any remorse or anything like that, because I do know it's a game.

George also had trouble investing in Niko as a character, and stated several times that he didn't feel particularly influenced by the game's characterisation of him while playing. Still, an interesting anecdote emerged from George's session, one that indicated that, while he may not be invested in the character, George still wanted to observe certain social etiquettes while playing as him. The moment George's file loaded, he received two phone calls on his in-game phone, concerning an event late in the game's story (which indicates that George has never saved his game post completion). The calls were mourning the death of an in-game character, Kate, who Niko was attached to. The first call came from Niko's cousin Roman, the second from her brother, Packie. During the conversation with Packie, George drove around aimlessly, telling me: "I'm just killing time until this conversation ends. Because I can't hang up, it would be disrespectful when they're saying someone's died!"

George had forgotten how to answer the phone initially, and how to use weapons, but this innate instinct to observe basic decency remained. In fact, George seemed curiously bound by any action that was precipitated by his in-game phone. Later in the session, he received a message from Kiki, one of Niko's girlfriends, asking him to give her a call. "I don't remember who Kiki is", he admitted to me; I reminded him of who the character was, and he seemed unsure on whether to call back. He decided to call her, and then seemed perturbed by the directions the game gave him for what to do next when she asked to be picked up within the next hour, which equates to about two minutes of 'real' time, as *GTA IV* operates on what Jesper Juul refers to as "incoherent time" (2005, p. 152), where the span of a day is accelerated. George seemed dismayed

at the request made: “in the next hour?! She’s all the way on the other side of town! Why did I answer that message? Oh, God!” He followed through on what he seemed to see as an obligation, picking up Kiki. Despite claiming to not identify with the character, George still seemed compelled to oblige the people Niko interacted with, even though doing so in no way impacted on his progress. Despite being frustrated by the demands made of him through the phone, George felt obligated to take these calls, and follow through on the requests made.

In general, though, George seemed less concerned with issues of identification and the character of Niko, and more with what his characterisation meant for the design of the game and its missions. He made it clear, commentating for the sake of the recording, that decisions were being made for his own personal benefit: “I shot a man on a bike, just because I wanted his bike”. At another point he shot a guard in the head, citing a curiosity about the gun the guard was holding: “I just shot an officer in the head. Just because I was wondering why he was carrying that thing.” For George, the connection between himself and the Niko avatar was a fairly simple one: although I had seen him unconsciously acting out social norms in his earlier in-game phone conversations, he referred to Niko as “his pawn”, who simply did whatever George made him do. While his interpretation is largely in line with Newman’s assertion that the avatar is a “vehicle” (2002), watching him play indicated that this connection ran deeper than the one he was articulating when he spoke of the character.

REACTIONING TO AND COMMUNICATING WITH THE AVATAR

The players reacted physically to events onscreen during their play sessions. Oral communication with both Niko and the digital citizens of Liberty City was common, whether through vocal impressions of the characters or speaking to them directly, with apology and regret being common threads throughout the play sessions. The word 'sorry' was used several times: David apologised to two pedestrians that he struck while playing (although his conservative play style meant that hitting pedestrians was a rare occurrence), while Marcus said 'sorry' to on-screen characters, apologising for his own actions, six times in seventy minutes, including one incident where he apologised to several drivers killed in a chain reaction of explosions he set off using a grenade. Although they often accompanied their words with laughter, both men expressed a certain level of sincerity as well; they did not speak ill of the digital dead or excuse their actions, saying 'sorry' as though they were admitting to having done something wrong. Barry, meanwhile, stated that he experienced remorse when he caused an unintentional death:

> I do when I don't mean to, like if I'm actually just trying to get somewhere quickly or something like that, and then I accidentally hit a bunch of pedestrians and the police come, like, 'oh crap! I didn't actually mean to do that!'. Kind of…things that just take you by surprise when you don't mean to do them. I kind of do. I mean…there's no kids in the game, I think I feel more remorseful when I kill a child in a game, or something like that.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the participants were aware of the taboo around the series, and it's likely that these apologies were, in my presence, a way of acknowledging the distinction between themselves and their in-game actions: they apologized because they owned these actions, but also wanted to acknowledge that, despite the fact that they were laughing, they recognized that the acts that they were committing were horrible. This physical manifestation of game actions is not uncommon, though: as Swalwell notes, from her interviews at LAN events, many gamers "recount the way they lean when cornering in a driving simulation" (2008, p. 74). From personal experience, killing innocent people in *Grand Theft Auto IV* has the potential to cause genuine regret – seven years later, I still remember, and regret, a specific unnecessary kill I performed in an early mission. The game requested that I wound an enemy; after doing so I went a step further by killing the enemy's friend, despite the game not prompting me to do so, because I considered the action thematically interesting. Despite having no real tangible consequence, *Grand Theft Auto IV* has the potential to make players question the reasoning behind the acts they perform, and to express remorse over them.

Beyond talking to the screen, the players also spoke in a way that positioned them *within* the screen space. Kyle referred to Niko in the first person, using the 'I' pronoun at all times: ("How far is the jump? Yeah, I'll survive that"). This is a fairly common action, amongst both my participants and in gaming discussion broadly, but it's also indicative of a certain style of embodiment that is popular among some players. Kyle stated that he preferred the 'silent' protagonists of *Grand Theft Auto I, II* & *III*:

> It sort of encompasses what I think GTA is about. Like, the original GTA

> wasn't about, sort of like, 'hey, I'm a guy that's got a sad story and got forced into it'. That's what *Red Dead Redemption*'s[6] about. This is, you're a criminal, and you're working for underworld mafia people. And that's pretty much all he was there for. He wasn't there because he had a story to tell or anything.

This criticism, coupled with his use of the 'I' pronoun, hint at the complexity of the connection between Kyle and his avatar here, and a central frustration at recognising ambitions other than his own embodied by the protagonist. Despite this frustration Kyle played quite recklessly, immediately going on a killing spree and calling the attention of the game's police. In the narrative told through *GTA IV*'s missions Niko is framed very differently to prior (and future) *GTA* protagonists: he is a man who is quick to violence, but who also frequently laments his violent behaviour. But no restrictions are placed on how you choose to use this characterisation: Kyle acknowledged that the enormous killing spree he instigated within a few minutes of his play session (which eventually resulted in his 'Wanted Rating' rising to six stars, the highest available in the game – a noticeably difficult, impressive feat) was out of character, but was not concerned about the implications – the fun of his spree was considered separately from the story.

David, whose play style was far more cautious, stated that he didn't like silent characters, and appreciated that Niko was "a walking, talking person". While Kyle took issue with the character not suiting his play style, David seemed willing to change the way he played to suit how he believed the character would react. As an observer, their methods were very different, but both acknowledged Niko's characterization as an issue

[6] *Red Dead Redemption*, 2010, Rockstar Games

worth considering in these instances of play. Marcus, too, tried to reason through what kind of person Niko was to justify his actions. He said: “you know, from my time spent as Niko, I feel he’s a very honest person, who’s just trying to…not figure out what happened in his past, but get…not revenge, but closure?”. For Marcus, this characterization directly impacted how he reacted to what Niko was doing; this goes some way to explaining why he felt the need to apologise to figures within the world that he killed or harmed.

The discussions around issues of identification and relationships between players and avatars, while understood in an abstract sense to be complicated, have largely been framed through disproportionately simple, frequently rather binary understandings. The player has been understood, in much of the rhetoric, as either embodying the character or simply controlling them as though they were a vehicle: studying actual examples of how players play reveals that their approaches are far more nuanced and considered than this, and that controlling an avatar does not result in a singular, consistent shift in that relationship**.** The typical concept of the videogame as a ‘vicarious experience’, in which the player is able to experience empathy for the character whom they assume the role of, and “interact in scenarios…within mediated, simulated, fantasy environments” (Marsh, 2005, p. 197), does not go far enough in recognising the full spectrum of possible connections between player and avatar. Having established the connections the players feel to their avatar, the next chapter examines player-driven narrative experiences.

CHAPTER V: PLAYER DRIVEN NARRATIVE EXPERIENCES AND NON-CANONICAL NARRATIVE REASONING

"Defeat Mannoroth in Well of Eternity on Heroic Difficulty after dealing enough damage to Mannoroth while Varo'then is still alive to cause him to sacrifice Varo'then to heal himself."

- *World of Warcraft*'s 'That's Not Canon!' achievement.

In this chapter I posit that when playing an open-world game such as *Grand Theft Auto IV*, players are made to constantly assess what does and doesn't 'count' as part of the story, and to decide whether certain actions are entirely out of the hands of their character or whether the avatar is complicit with every crime and action committed in-game. This can lead to a complex mental process as the player's idea of their character is shaped and reshaped; elements of the avatar's personality may be abandoned for actions that are not thought of as part of the larger narrative, and entire sections of gameplay may be mentally discarded as outside of the game's 'true' version of events. I refer to this model of narrative thinking as a 'non-canonical' model. Despite the abstract nature of this idea, this is a concept that every participant was able to discuss and understand, with several of them able to grasp exactly how it applied to their gaming experiences immediately.

While the concept of 'canon' is typically used, in an artistic or cultural context, to suggest an 'essential' series of texts within a medium, among fan communities the

term is used to debate what parts of a body of work do or don't 'count'. The idea is that lengthy works or series can have an 'official' story running through them: often it must be one that holds up to scrutiny, or must be the work of the original author of the series – and anything that falls outside of this can be dismissed as 'non-canon', or not part of the events of the series. Often fans will argue that the 'canon' lines up with the intent of the author – to use one common example of this thought process, if an anime adapted from a manga includes an episode arc that was not in the original text, fans may disregard these episodes as non-canon. In applying 'canon' to *Grand Theft Auto IV*, I do not intend to place it in the context of the *Grand Theft Auto* series: this game is not explicitly linked to any of the games that came before it. Rather, I want to look at the experience of playing through the game as being similar to the way fans engage with an episodic series, in that players can separate their experience into 'episodes' and declare which ones do or don't 'count' as part of their own personal 'canon'.

To use a personal anecdote to further illustrate this: I recently played through *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000) and *Deus Ex: Invisible War* (Ion Storm, 2003), two games renowned for the amount of choices they offer the player. Early in both games, I conducted a simple experiment to see whether the games would allow me to perform acts that are generally considered taboo: I killed children. In both games I encountered children, went into the pause menu and saved my game, killed the children, and then reloaded the save file to bring the child back to life. In both games I saw the children die, but by reloading the file the events no longer 'counted': they weren't part of the 'canon' of my *Deus Ex* story, even though they feature prominently when people ask me for anecdotes about either game. It is not

that these events are stricken from my memory, or from my knowledge of the game – in both instances, I decided that killing these children did not make sense in the context of the game. In the first *Deus Ex*, in fact, I ended up killing a child soon after and allowing it to become part of my 'canon' experience, reasoning that my heavily augmented protagonist was, at that early point in the game, struggling to understand the concept of 'humanity', and it made sense to him that this child (who was proving a largely harmless nuisance) should die. While playing *Deus Ex*, I killed two children; by reloading an old save file, I made sure that only one of them counted as part of my established in-game 'canon'. In the case of *GTA IV*, the 'canon' established by the participants in this research encompassed actions and events that they believed to be part of the primary narrative running through the game, while 'non-canon' events were ones that didn't count, that were enacted purely for enjoyment, experimentation, or, in some cases, which ended in an unacceptable failure.

A player engaging with *GTA IV* is confined to the world and mechanics the developers have provided them, and to certain 'rules' the game contains, but is also granted a degree of creative freedom to engage in elements that are not essential to the progress of the storyline. Outside of the game's missions, which have defined 'win' conditions, players are punished for certain actions (the police may attempt to arrest or kill you if they see you committing a crime, for instance) but they are never explicitly told that what they are doing is 'wrong'. It is largely through playing within the game's confines, ignoring the standard 'goals' of a videogame – to complete all missions and reach the end credits as efficiently as possible - that the player is able to engage in explicit acts of story making that are largely divorced from the work of the game's writers. In

Cybertext, Espen Aarseth says that "when a system is sufficiently complex, it will, by intention, fault, or coincidence, inevitably produce results that could not be predicted even by the system designer" (1997, p. 27). In many open world games, including *GTA IV*, this is certainly intentional, and central to how the game is marketed by the publishers, covered in the media, and understood by players. Without the game's intervention in these matters, it is up to the individual player to establish their own personal rules for what does and doesn't 'count', and to personally determine both how much narrative consistency means to them and what moments they need to ignore, replay, or re-evaluate to achieve it.

EMERGENT NARRATIVES AND PLAYER EXPRESSION

In 1994, Aarseth outlined what he referred to as a 'nonlinear text': "an object of verbal communication that wasn't simply one fixed series of letters, words, and sentences but one in which the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text" (1994, p. 51). This is a useful way of framing both the appeal of a game like *Grand Theft Auto IV*, and the appeal of discussing a game like this. Although each player is put into the same world, the experiences they have will differ heavily based on the ways they choose to interact with that world – the 'text' that emerges, the story of their play experience, will rarely match up exactly with other players' experiences. These experiences, when the player has a moment in the game which is personal to their play session, are often referred to as 'emergent narratives'. The narrative is said to "emerge and evolve through (player) actions" (Lowndes, 2010, p.3), the idea being that systems at the heart of the game's design are important in the emergence of narratives within the game (Poremba, 2006,

pp. 199-200). This is an elegant way of expressing the relationship between the player and the potential stories that can emerge from their experiences, although it is worth noting that these narratives are not emerging fully-formed, nor are they pre-set. The notion of 'emergence' suggests that these player driven narrative experiences are being produced entirely on the screen and within the '3D space' beyond it, that these narratives literally *emerge* within the game space. Yet much of the narrative may be (and frequently is) internalised by the player, forming in their head rather than on the screen. These stories only really exist to the audience – usually one player, controller in hand – until they choose to tell others about them. By way of the game's design, players are actively encouraged to become storytellers through their experiences. In observing my participants, I was able to share in the narratives that emerged through their play experiences: stories of chaos, of trying to maintain order, of police chases and assassination missions. These narratives were significant to the players not just because of what was happening, but because they were, in part, authoring them – a car exploding by itself may not entice a player, but if the car exploded because they chose to throw the grenade that caused it, the thrill of seeing the world react to their actions invests them in the small narrative they have just created. It brings to mind Michel de Certeau's commentary on the act of renting a property, and then furnishing it as one sees fit:

> Renters make…changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and through their accent, through their "turns of phrase" etc., their own history; as do pedestrians, in the streets they fill with the forests of their desires and goals (1984, p. xxi).

By this, de Certeau means that we as individuals are capable of taking public objects and places, and spaces that we did not create nor own, and making them feel like they are personal in the ways that we interact with them. *GTA IV* tells a story through its missions and cut-scenes, which remains largely the same, with a few minor variations, for each player who finishes it. But within the act of playing, each person has the capacity to shape the experience in a way that is unique to them, to decide which parts of the story fit or don't fit, and to determine what sort of man they consider Niko to be, and whether this should or will affect the way they play.

Many of these emergent experiences arrive from what Pedro Cardoso and Miguel Carvalhais refer to as 'modulating traversal': play in which "the player is able to craft relationships, and to regulate the disposition of characters and actors in the game towards the playable character and/or between themselves" (2013, p. 27). Although the term is deployed in their writing in direct reference to in-game morality and loyalty systems, in which decisions made during missions affect your standings with other characters within the world, this concept is applicable to the *Grand Theft Auto* gameplay model at large – acting aggressively within the world sees the world turn against you, with police and armed citizens attacking you or others fleeing. The game world is reactive to the player's whims and actions.

The idea that players create their own stories is essential to many modern game developers. How they're told and what sort of reasoning the player needs to make to justify the events that make up these personal narratives is worth exploring. Patrice Désilets, creator of *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007), an open world game set across several Middle Eastern cities, revealed in an interview with *Edge* magazine that he

preferred the original game to its sequels because it allowed the player to, in part, craft their own narrative experiences:

> "I like the first *Assassin's Creed* because it's the purest one," he tells us. "There's a bunch of stories that you can have, but it's all in your head. You have to create your own adventures. Whereas in *Assassin's Creed II*, we created the adventures for you and you're following them (Brown, 2012).

Similarly, Randy Smith, co-designer of Thief: The Dark Project (1998), refers to 'player expression' in a similar context. In an interview he used an example of a player who had completed a mission in an interesting manner:

> One by one, he hunted down each of Bafford's hired guards, smacked them with the blackjack, and dragged their unconscious bodies into the dining room where he arranged them in colourful poses: propped up back to back, legs poking out from the dumbwaiter, or draped across the length of the dinner table. Then he collected every available wine bottle and tossed them haphazardly in with the comatose crowd. Here was the perfect crime. When the Lord returned home, he'd find his precious treasure missing and his security staff in severe disarray after what was evidently a night of debauchery while the boss was away (Smith, 2011).

It is, Smith expanded, almost impossible to reward the player for such instances of 'player expression' unless each specific possible scenario is built into the code. In the same way, a player who creates a character for a game that is dressed inappropriately for the situations they find themselves in may take pleasure from the instance that is completely outside of any reward offered within the game. These sorts of expressions, which are rewarded only by the player's own amusement and which serve as potential anecdotes, are a rich part of the *Grand Theft Auto* experience for many players.

The positioning of the GTA protagonist within regular, recognisable cycles of life serves to make the player feel as though their play-driven narrative experiences are occurring in a realistic world, which is integral to the 'emergence' of these stories. Players are, as Timothy J. Welsh explains his essay 'Everyday Play: Cruising For Leisure in San Andreas' (2006, pp. 127-142), not affected by the game's otherwise realistic cycles of night and day, of waking and sleep, or of crime and punishment: although the character can sleep and eat they can also delay these actions indefinitely, and being 'killed' will simply result in them respawning outside a hospital with less money than before. However, the fact that these cycles happen at all is significant, as is the way the world exists around Niko – if you follow a pedestrian, or a car, or a service worker in an ambulance or taxi or police car, the player will note that the world operates in a realistic manner. The disruption of normality is an important part of the stories players create through their actions in the game.

SHARING STORIES

The *Grand Theft Auto* games, despite not featuring extensive co-operative campaign options, have always been popular as 'spectator' games: even in the sessions I observed for this thesis, it was hard to shut off my innate desire to make suggestions and requests, to tell the players to do something specific and see the results. They have long been a shared experience amongst players, despite not actively requiring players to work together.

The idea that single-player games are inherently antisocial acts has persisted in the literature surrounding them for some time. Discussing the *Grand Theft Auto* games in relation to Emily Short's 2001 all-text piece of 'interactive fiction', Nick Montfort made inferences about the lack of 'team play' aspects inherent in the *Grand Theft Auto* games:

> The free-wheeling *Grand Theft Auto III* and the later games in the series (…) allow the player to forgo signing up for missions to roam around and undertake exploration and random acts of violence. But, although the late games in the *Grand Theft Auto* series[7] seem to have learned a lot from interactive fiction and adventure games that allow such freedom, they still do not offer as many affordances for team play. The real-time nature of those games and their intermittent reliance on uninterpretable performances of driving, shooting and other kinds of skill means that players can't work together as easily on their PlayStation 2 as they can in front of their Z-

[7] Montfort's essay was published in 2007, before the release of *GTA IV*; it's possible that his comments would be different had he been privy to the game's multiplayer modes, although it's worth noting that *GTA: San Andreas* featured multiplayer as well, albeit in a far more limited capacity.

machine interpreter (2007, p. 187).

My own experiences, and those of my participants suggests otherwise: players do not play in a vacuum. Although direct 'teamwork' is not encouraged, the sharing of stories and information is a valuable example of players contributing towards a larger understanding of the game and how it works. To give a simple example: during our session Kyle showed me a trick for restarting a car with a damaged engine (by using your in-game phone to dial 911) that I have used myself in the game since to overcome difficult situations. Tricks like this are placed in the game under the assumption that players will pass them on to others once they learn about them, to prompt discussion about the game between groups of people.

The Internet and other forms of communication technology have allowed participatory cultures to share their exploits, achievements and stories widely, and players will often play these games with the knowledge that there are social communities that will, as Henry Jenkins puts it, "provide strong incentives for creative expression and active participation" (2009, p. 6). Still, most of the participants who recalled talking about the game extensively at release remembered doing so with friends, face to face: although David remembered discussion on the forums I recruited him for this thesis from, he didn't participate because he could not get the game running on his computer, while Barry, Kyle and Marcus all recalled getting together with friends and discussing their exploits in the game shortly after launch. All four of them recognised that discussing the game with friends was an important part of their enjoyment of it.

The sharing of these moments has been an important part of how the appeal of *Grand Theft Auto* is communicated. A recent retrospective of the game on the website *Eurogamer* opened with a simple anecdote about an in-game moment:

> At an intersection, a car narrowly misses me as I cross the street. I stop and glare. The car stops and the driver gets out, all bravado and threats. I'm about to square up to him, when I notice a cop car waiting at the lights. I turn and walk away, stop at the corner and watch as the jerk gets back in his car and drives off. Niko rubs his close-cropped hair pensively. A scruffy-looking guy shuffles past, eating a hot dog. He looks homeless. Frankly, so does Niko. Time for breakfast. (Whitehead, 2013)

This is not to say that players are playing the game and having the experiences shared in this thesis for the benefits of an audience. As Kiri Miller notes, players are also free to "explore incredibly detailed terrain with touristic anonymity, never subjecting themselves to other players' judgements about their behaviour, skills, or appearance" (2008, p. 5). Unlike many of the videogames that have been the subject of major ethnographic and player observational studies thus far, *Grand Theft Auto IV* can be enjoyed as a genuinely solitary experience, played alone offline. Players are not necessarily sharing their exploits or the results of their exploration, which means that their stories, the ways they work through the game world and reason through the events presented to them, often go unseen and untold.

In many cases, though, players share their personal experiences with other players online. As David Kusher explains in *Jacked: The Unauthorised Behind-the-Scenes Story of Grand Theft Auto*, the way players exchanged information about their play experiences online was an important part of the series' culture after the release of *Grand Theft Auto III*:

> Players swapped tales of their adventures in the game as if they had taken place in real life. "The first few days," posted one online, "I did nothing but run around the city stealing cars and running over hookers." (2012, p. 102).

Not all player driven narratives are as simple as this one, however. The players interviewed did not simply list transgressions, but grappled with more complicated questions of who the character was, and what their actions meant.

'CANON'

The idea that aspects of a game can be 'non-canon' is a very postmodern concept, one that upsets more traditional ideas of authorship and narrative structure. Yet contemporary videogame design all but demands certain suspensions of disbelief, the erasure of mechanics and interface elements to make sense of the fiction. The very notion that Niko is able to heal any wounds he sustains in-game by visiting a fast food outlet and purchasing a hamburger is absurd, but as a game mechanic it provides an elegant solution to the problem of the protagonist's mortality (and is, in

fact, less absurd that the regenerative health model used by many action games, which see a character regaining full health simply by avoiding harm for several seconds). The crime sprees players engage with can end in equally ludicrous ways – either Niko is 'killed', respawning immediately at a hospital, arrested, respawning outside a police station,[8] or escapes the police, who abandon their search for him. This isn't persistent – no matter how high the body count, Niko is never labelled a permanently 'wanted' man – but the players interviewed never mentioned this as a bugbear or impediment to their understanding of the game world.

Adam Ruch considered the notion of canon in a blog post while reflecting on his own thesis work, making specific reference to Bioware's *Mass Effect* series of games (which demand several explicit, plot-altering choices be made by the player):

> The space for interpreting and reconfiguring the text is inside the text itself, as opposed to living on fan-fic pages where Draco and Harry make out. The space continues to extend, so you can have fan-fic outside the game as well--there's plenty of it. There is a difference between making a choice inside the game (male or female, Ashley or Kaiden?[9]) and writing a piece of fan-fic outside the game, but is it a significant difference? Is the choice made within the game more like the fan-fic, or more like an authorially, canonically true event? (Ruch, 2012).

[8] No excuse for Niko's freedom is explicitly outlined in *GTA IV*, although in *GTA: Vice City*, players would occasionally hear a voice sample of a lawyer arguing protagonist Tommy's innocence moments before respawning.
[9] Ruch is refering to an incident in the game *Mass Effect*, wherein the player/protagonist must choose between the lives of two characters.

Aside from the outlandish mechanics, *GTA IV*'s fantastical elements are light compared to many other open world action games, limited mostly to 'Easter eggs'.[10] Although the game presents unrealistic consequences, circumstances and strives to convenience the player's enjoyment regardless of feasibility, the game is grounded in notions of the 'real' world, and by extension, the rules that govern most societies. The player doesn't need to be told that running over a pedestrian in the game is amoral; this is an assumed understanding, and the game does not need to explain why the protagonist is being punished for it.

But the punishment that Niko must endure – typically a 'wanted' rating and the aggression of the Liberty City Police Department – isn't necessarily a punishment for the player, outside of certain specific circumstances where police involvement is inconvenient or unwanted. Several of the participants involved in this study actively chose to engage the police. After pondering out loud at the start of our session to pass the time in-game, Kyle attracted the policy by indiscriminately hurling Molotov cocktails at pedestrians, alternating between dry commentary of his spree, discussion about other elements of the game, and occasional cries of excitement as he engaged in a killing spree that took his 'wanted level' up to the highest rating possible. Other players, quizzed on their comparatively less volatile behaviour, simply presented it as a practical way of navigating the world. When asked why he was driving carefully in the game world without being explicitly prompted to do so, David replied "you try to do as minimal damage as you can, because the cars explode and shit as well."

[10] An 'Easter egg' is a non-essential element snuck into a videogame for the player to discover, which in no way advances the plot or benefits them beyond their own amusement. In *GTA IV*, for instance, players can access a secret entrance to the inside of the 'State of Happiness' (a replica of the State of Liberty, holding a coffee cup rather than a flame), wherein they find a giant beating heart, held up by chains.

SUBVERSIVE NORMALITY

The first *Grand Theft Auto* game was originally meant to be named *Cops & Robbers*, and would have cast players as police within an open world, looking to uphold the law and prevent crimes rather than committing their own. David's play style stuck fairly closely to the style that was originally envisioned for the first *GTA*, in that he broke few in-game laws and drove in a fairly sensible manner. He revelled in the available options for sensible play, driving carefully and avoiding pedestrians. His careful style prompted discussion on the nature of canon within the game, and what does and doesn't 'count', in terms of actions that can be attributed to Niko. When I asked David about whether the experiences he had outside of missions 'counted' as part of the overall narrative of his experience – including incidents where he died and reloaded – he responded by telling me "that's just part of the bloopers file, I guess". This is an interesting way of framing the position of the player as performer. When questioned how he felt when he ran over innocent pedestrians or went on a killing spree not prompted by a mission objective, he responded:

> How do I put it… that's not part of the story. That's just being silly at the spur of the moment, because of the tools you've been given in a sandbox. Sometimes it's a case of going 'how many stars, or I wonder how quickly I could get all the stars', you know, or how long I can survive…yeah, it's not the story.

When I asked David to clarify whether these moments counted as part of the story, he simply replied ‘nah’, with a certainty that suggested that he had considered this question before. Barry, on the other hand, largely abandoned the idea of playing conservatively after realising that it wasn’t necessary for progress:

> At first I did, because it was my first Grand Theft Auto game. I’m like ‘Aw, I don’t know how I’m meant to drive in this city’. So yeah, for the first couple of missions I was stopping at traffic lights, staying on the right side of the road, all that kind of stuff. But then as I got more comfortable with the game and the streets, I was like ‘Nah, fuck it. I’m just gonna run over everything, who cares.’

This was not a criticism, however: although he recognised the dissonance, he didn’t think it detracted from the experience too severely. “I mean, like…it’s a game. It’s a Grand Theft Auto game, after all. You kind of expect to shoot people and get prostitutes and stuff.” Barry was still able to provide me with anecdotes about his time with the game, although not all of them were particularly exciting as stories. His more mundane pleasures were, he thought, grounded in the impressive technology the game exhibited. When asked whether he enjoyed simply ‘existing’ in the game, walking the streets and taking in the scenery, he replied:

> Um…the first time (I walked the streets) I think I did, because it felt…the engine, the Euphoria engine, kind of grounded it more in reality, so I kind of

> felt like a person walking into a city and bumping into people and having to push them out of the way sometimes. But then afterwards I was just like 'eh, I can just steal a car and get around a lot faster'. I kind of avoided playing the mini-games like bowling and things like that, just because it was a bit cumbersome. But yeah, if I can take a vehicle, I take a vehicle. Some of the on-foot missions though I enjoyed, where you're chasing someone. Those are cool.

When I asked him directly whether he reasoned through what did and didn't 'count' as part of the narrative when going on a rampage, and whether the ability to do so affected how 'immersed' he was in the experience, Barry responded:

> I never really thought of it like that. Maybe with pedestrians a bit, because I try not to hit them, unless I steal their car and they try to punch me or something like that, then I just run 'em over, whatever. But….in terms of like, you know, running red lights or getting away from police and stuff, not so much. I mean I can…it's just a game after all, and I can tell the difference between a game and real life. So in reality I'm gonna be responsible and law abiding. But in a game I can do whatever I want.

This attitude embodies the spirit that draws many people to *Grand Theft Auto* games. David Annadale argues, discussing *San Andreas* and the wider *Grand Theft Auto* franchise by extension, that "from radio ads that are recognizable in form and style but subversively honest in content, to a vision of corruption that extends to all reaches of

society, creating a world of inverted moral and ethical values, the game is a digital incarnation of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque" (2006, p. 89). By this, Annadale means that the games embrace the chaotic: there is a sense of unification and a break down in class structure, represented in the games through the player's ability to enact mayhem upon the world. This chaos is the basis of many player driven narrative experiences, but at the same time this chaos is now an expected part of the game – by *GTA IV*, the rules of *Grand Theft Auto* were well established, and this sense of chaotic excess was, while still potentially shocking, largely expected.

But while *Grand Theft Auto* may rightly be described as satirical and subversive, it could also be argued that the series, by 2008, was so ingrained in popular culture that it had become a huge part of the very society it was satirising. While chaos was a part of the play experience for the participants, the concept of avoiding chaos, and of purposely playing around the game's more violent and controversial content, seemed to provide the players with a different kind of pleasure: to simply 'exist' within the world, without actively seeking aggression, is a subversion of the cultural expectations directed towards *Grand Theft Auto.*

The simple act of 'existing' within the game's reality is often cited as an appealing element of the *GTA* franchise: talking specifically about *GTA: San Andreas*, Timothy J. Welsh argues that "the very everydayness of these practices plays an important role in the sensation of freedom produced" (2006, p. 127-128). The ability to wander around a space that has been created digitally, but which resembles the real world, has long been one of the possibilities of gaming that has drawn attention. Discussing *Heavy Rain*, Ian Bogost considers the notion of players being able to contextualise their experiences by

recreating actions that would be abbreviated in filmed media; he discusses the possibility of taking time with a scene and allowing the character to react realistically, in much the same way that Barry chose to walk Niko down the street and appreciate the way it was "grounded in reality". Bogost (2010) says "if 'edit' is the verb that makes cinema what it is, then perhaps videogames ought to focus on the opposite: extension, addition, prolonging." There is a sense of 'extension' to these actions, of absorbing the pleasure of the crafted world in a way that would likely seem indulgent within a narrative, filmed or otherwise, in which the scene on a man slowly and silently walking the streets was forced upon you.

GTA IV is the sixth major 3D open world release in the series; by the time it came out, the series' tropes were so ingrained that the idea of a play style that stuck to established real-world social conventions was itself subversive. Barry and David both displayed play styles that explicitly avoided excess, while Marcus said that while playing he "felt the urge to go around killing someone". Expectations are subverted in these player narratives of 'sensible' play, which can lead to players creating and sharing unique experiences. Attempts have been made, by some players, to craft and share a narrative in which Niko commits the least crime possible. Michael 'Micskill' Redding's 'Pacifist Niko Challenge', posted on *GameFaqs* (2010), outlines his methods for finishing the game while breaking as few laws and killing as few people as possible. This challenge aims to make players "rethink the most fundamental aspects of the game by disallowing several mechanics and actions that are possible during gameplay. Playthroughs that limit your methods of interaction within the game world are typical for popular videogames. The *Resident Evil* franchise, in particular, is often played by skilled gamers who like to avoid using the majority of the weapons provided in the game, often only

using the knife provided at the game's opening. Play throughs and guides like this are subversive in that they avoid the game's fundamental violence, and, in the case of *GTA IV*, bring the entire game closer to a sort of narrative consistency while simultaneously subverting expectations.

I asked Kyle if he was ever tempted to reload old files to erase poor performances, incidents, or losses. He told me that he often doesn't worry if Niko has been killed: **"**I usually just carry on. Sometimes I will load an older save, but in *Grand Theft Auto* I found when you die you don't really lose any weapons or anything. So you only lose a little bit of money?" I then asked him about being arrested, which carries a harsher penalty: the removal of all weapons the player is carrying:

> I didn't, because I found it easy to just pick up and go with it. But in harder games, I have been known to do that. I think a lot of people do that. Now, recently, I try not to do that at all. Because I try to play it through once, like, just however I stuff up. And then I go back and try to play it well. In *Grand Theft Auto IV* I found it was easy enough to not have to do that.

CONSISTENT ROLE-PLAYING

Other aspects of the game, such as the friendship system and statistics screen, can affect how players choose to play when given free reign, and how invested players get in figuring out which actions are or aren't consistent with their understanding of how the world and characters of *Grand Theft Auto IV* operate. When I asked Marcus if he had gotten invested in the in-game friendships, which can be explored outside of missions if

Niko chooses to use his phone to call up a list of friends and invite them out, he gave an interesting response:

> Maybe my second playthrough I tried to do the whole, you know, 'be a real person' thing? Like, you know, do everything right and just…talk to everyone, and go out. Which was….that was probably the most fun I had playing the game. Because it was super immersive and you just really felt like it was a real city and they were real people.

The idea that Marcus had played in a way that felt more 'real' to him in his second playthrough, and that he thus enjoyed it more, suggests that he got more out of playing the game in a way that better resembled his idea of reality. In this way he has established two distinct narratives between the playthroughs, one of which he considers more real, and thus more satisfying. I then asked him whether he tended to save his game after going on a 'rampage', or causing significant mayhem. It turned out that his approach was similar to my own when I play the game, although it wasn't something he consciously considered much:

> There's only really been a handful of times where I've thought 'I'm gonna go on a rampage'. It's weird, but…I don't usually save it. I mean, money…you can get that money back if you really want to. Plus the money really only gives you weapons in this game, there's not much else you have to buy. Whereas in San Andreas, money was a big part of it…Yeah, I don't know, I've never really thought about having to 'save' before you go on a

rampage.

George's perfectionism, outlined in previous chapters, is worth considering further in the context of his narrative 'canon'. He said to me that "as a perfectionist by nature I tend not to do things that will have too many negative repercussions when I'm actually going to save the game" – meaning that his end-game statistics, which were extremely impressive, were not strictly accurate because so much of his play time had been erased. When he showed me these statistics, a different idea of personal narrative became clear to me – George wanted proof that he had mastered the game, and played it better than could reasonably be expected of someone playing the game through for the first time, when in truth his errors had still occurred but had simply been erased. Opening the statistics screen, he said to me: "you'll also notice 'missions failed: 0'. That's because I never…if I failed a mission, I'd reload my save." The correction he made here – seemingly going to say that he never failed a mission, before realizing that this isn't the truth and correcting himself – suggests that in his ideal narrative Niko, and by extension George himself, never experienced failure, and he manipulated his experience in a way that made the statistics reflect this fact. The 'perfect' playthrough was his idea of the narrative's 'canon', despite the discrepancies in the actual gameplay experience.

Players are acutely aware of the issue of ludonarrative dissonance in a game like *GTA IV* – when the player is afforded choices that the character presented would be unlikely to make – and part of the game's appeal is how this freedom is negotiated. By exploring the 'non-canon' narrative experiences the participants had, we get a greater understanding of how players reason through the narrative possibilities an open-world design affords them. Each participant came away from the game with different, equally

valid interpretations of what did or didn't 'count' as part of the wider narrative of the game. In this way, players are able to make personal moments and come away from their experiences with different ideas about the characters, the world, and the story being told.

CHAPTER VI: HOW AND WHY PLAYERS TELL THEIR NARRATIVES

> Decades after de Certeau laid out his theory, the GTA games are demonstrating how the moment-to-moment art of placing one's blows and mastering someone else's space can accumulate into a pop-culture compendium of travel narratives, a collection of loosely connected, widely circulated stories about place, representation, agency, urban realpolitik and ethical subjectivity.
>
> Kiri Miller, 2008

Direct examinations of player experience, and discussions around the ways players treat, understand and place importance on their experiences, are essential for examining how videogames are received and played. Much is lost when a videogame is considered separate from its players: *Grand Theft Auto IV* has been played by millions of people, while the wider series would have been played by tens of millions, each of whom will have experienced the games, and series, in a way that is personal to them. The act of sharing one's experience with the game is important: the *Grand Theft Auto* games are designed to be discussed, and doing so can enhance the experience. Through discussion players are able to express their personal experiences and achievements within the game, and create a shared understanding of the game world. This extends to extratextual practices such as modding, writing fan-fiction, editing together machinima films and constructing play guides, activities that bring player communities together and encourage cooperation and discussion. In this chapter I emphasise the importance of researching play practices; understanding how and why players share their experiences in games is essential to understanding the enduring appeal of games such as *GTA IV*,

and the design philosophies that best encourage the establishment and growth of enthusiast communities.

While the majority of this thesis has considered the experience of the players who agreed to participate in my research, their willingness to discuss the game is symptomatic of a larger legacy of player discussion and creation, centered on producing numerous different forms of content from their experience with videogames. The fact that "the experience of videogames is tied inextricably to the player's investment and involvement within the game's textual diegesis" (Veale, 2012) means that a discussion between two or more people about a game will likely involve some discussion around the actual act of play, and whether each player had similar or different experiences based on their own actions, interpretations and tastes. For players, these discussions and actions are important; they should be equally important to videogame researchers.

The interest displayed by the players interviewed for this thesis suggested that they were excited to have their experiences acknowledged in an academic context, and to have their experiences and opinions documented and examined in this way. David, in a later communication well after the initial interview, expressed thanks that I was striving to "do more, be more, find more, and share it, shape it, and make it known to all" with the research he had participated in. The reactions from my participants exemplified their keen interest in this area of study, and gratitude that their thoughts and actions were being taken seriously.

Dan Houser, co-founder of Rockstar Games and a writer on *GTA IV*, shared a story from his own time within the game in an interview before the game's release:

> There are so many defining moments, but a recent one was during a police chase. A song I love came on one of the radio stations while I had two cop cars chasing me through Chinatown. I was speeding along when another cop car I hadn't seen rammed me straight on, our cars crunched together, and I was sent flying through the windshield. I ducked into cover and could still hear the song playing from my smashed-up car. Then the cops opened fire, but one of them hit a pedestrian who pulled out his gun and started shooting. The next thing I know, there was a full-scale war going on between a random gang and the cops. Within a few seconds all the cops were dead and the gang members walked away. I got hold of another car and quietly drove out of the search area to lose my wanted level. (Ashcraft, 2008)

From a marketing perspective, the message of Houser's story is clear – Rockstar wanted players to share these moments, and take pride in their ability to create them from their own experiences. The implication was that players wouldn't simply have these experiences; they would, like Houser, be able to share them and take pride in their part in making these events unfold.

Many recent videogames contain resources and interfaces for online sharing of footage and opinion, and the latest consoles - Microsoft's Xbox One and Sony's PlayStation 4 - have been designed with integrated video recording and streaming capabilities for every game. Sharing content has become a selling point of these systems, with services like Twitch (which allows people to watch live streams of other people's gameplay experiences) growing in popularity. Before the launch of these consoles, other games were adopting similar approaches: open world action game *Just Cause 2* (Avalanche Studios & Eidos Interactive, 2010) and open world skateboarding game *Skate 3* (EA

Black Box, 2010) both allow players to immediately upload footage from their game onto YouTube, making it easier for players without capturing software (especially those playing on console) to share their exploits, while *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (Treyarch, 2012) has a multiplayer feature that allows players to stream their games online for others to watch. In these three cases, the ability to share experience is explicitly made part of the game's design, catering both to the players and to potential audiences who are interested in watching their footage. This is a recognition of how important shared experiences have become for many game players.

FAN CULTURES

The infrastructure is in place now to facilitate fan conversations and actions that were previously restricted to conventions, zines, radio and fan clubs. The barrier for entry into participatory culture is, for most people in a position to own and play videogames, relatively low. Henry Jenkins (2006, pp. 135-136) pinpoints three trends that have made this so:

> 1. New tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content;
> 2. a range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed these technologies; and
> 3. economic trends favouring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship.

These points outlined by Jenkins are analogous to several participatory actions that are popular among players of the game. Many consumers of *GTA IV* and other games extend their experience beyond simply doing what the game asks of them (as exemplified throughout this thesis by my participant research), or engage with the game beyond the act of playing it. There is scope for the player to define their own objectives within the game world, or to engage in acts of *bricolage*, constructing their gameplay experience based on the tools provided to them by the game rather than adhering to any notion of how the game is 'meant' to be played. Players' actions can extend beyond the traditional 'play' experience and something approaching transmedia, "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins, 2007). It's not so much that a game like *GTA IV* tells a story across multiple media that's of relevance to this thesis, but rather that the gameplay experience can prompt the telling of stories – in real life, on forums, through fanfiction and machinima – that enhance a player's appreciation of the game itself.

de Certeau presents the argument in *The Practices of Everyday Life* (more pertinently named in its original French *Arts de Faire*, roughly 'The Art of Making') that the content witnessed and behaviour enacted by consumers of media, which has typically been misconstrued as 'passive', should be "complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer "makes" or "does" during this time and with these images" (1984, p. xii). The act of 'making' has long been integral to the interactions between consumers and gaming computers – the home coding scene of the 1980s was inherently based around what was 'made' by consumers by the programs they coded on the machines

they owned (Swalwell, 2008) - but the increased sophistication of current consoles and computers have shifted the dynamics of player interactions with videogames and videogame related materials. But to simply 'make' without sharing the results would, for many players, not represent an ideal, or perhaps even an adequate, experience.

The larger 'community' of *Grand Theft Auto IV* players is made up of numerous smaller, frequently intersecting networks, spread across different forums, websites, social media pages and real-life circles (which may or may not be formed or dedicated in order to discuss the game or the series), within which members exert different degrees of influence or authority over others. Citing Pierre Levy, Henry Jenkins describes these communities as 'new media' environments, and as 'knowledge communities':

> The new knowledge communities will be voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members may shift from one community to another as their interests and needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time (2006, p. 137).

In pop-culture 'fan' communities, participants are free to shift between positions of privilege, knowledge and power that are related to, but not necessarily in direct correlation with, their real-life personas or their in-game actions. Looking at games specifically, the connection between player and avatar is often a crucial part of the player's actions within these networks. It's worth considering the relationship between networks of conversation (often online, and thus firmly identifiable as spaces of

technology) and the people who participate in them (players who, through their online discussions, directly contribute to the proliferation of websites, forums, etc.) as a further riff on the complicated relationship between player and avatar that forms during gameplay. The medium through which these relationships are conducted are both virtual in nature, both allowing the user to project themselves onto non-corporeal environments; in this way, telling the stories that have formed out of the gameplay experience seems like natural progression from the experience itself. Essentially, numerous acts of 'fandom' can be understood as an extension of the game experience, and these acts are encouraged by developers and members of existing fan communities in various ways in the hopes of extending the experience of the game beyond the act of engaging with it through a controller or keyboard.

Developers are invested in creating 'communities' for their games, as they encourage brand loyalty and generate excitement for their games. When the term 'community' is raised in Game Studies, however, it's typically in the context of an in-game community. The 'social networks' of videogames are frequently examined in relation to massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs), in which participation within and between large, dedicated networks of players is generally essential for accessing much of the game's content. In part, this stems from an inherent desire on the part of researchers to understand, to quote one study, "why people spend so many hours playing on the Internet" (Kolo & Baur, 2004), and because the social layers at work – the separate between online and offline, as well as the relationships between players, administrators, and hierarchies established both inside and outside the game world – are more immediately clear to an observer. Online virtual worlds are frequently romanticised; in *I, Avatar,* Mark Stephen Meadows refers to *Second Life* as a 'new

world…one marked by massive automation, promises of wealth, rampant lawlessness, rumours of ruination, emerging cults, (and) political upheaval" (2007, p. 7). Similar terminology is central to many arguments for videogames as anti-social or damaging products. In 2006, noting the controversies around online in-game communities, Chee, Vieta and Smith noted that "popular accounts of the dangers of gaming fall into a discourse about the Internet as a lonely and risky place where online users are likely to be depressed and dislocated from the wider, offline population" (2006, p. 155). The concept of an 'offline population' is interesting; although in this case the authors use the term to refer to people who do not engage with or play the game *Everquest*, the global population of web users is, as of December 31 2014, over 3 billion, while social networking website Facebook, as of the first quarter of 2015, has 936 million daily users (*Internetworldstats.com*, accessed June 2015). Social networks are an essential part of the experience of modern fandom, facilitating easy access to other fans and communities. Rockstar even operates its own social network, the 'Rockstar Social Club' (http://socialclub.rockstargames.com/), which encourages players to consider their private gameplay experiences as being worthy of social discussion and display. Much of the taboo has gone from the idea of the 'online community', but in Game Studies the idea that the term should apply only to communities formed in-game, to some extent, still remains.

The communities surrounding *GTA IV* and other games are part of a longer tradition of fan communities, which used to centre on newsletters, radio programmes and conventions, but can also exist on a much smaller scale, or within larger communities. Two of my research participants were recruited from a forum post on the website *Games On Net*, while the others were members of other gaming networks online. In my

discussion with David, he recalled distinctly that the game was being discussed on the website around the time of the PC release,[11] over four years prior to our discussion: "Oh, yeah. I probably didn't say too much because everyone else was playing it and I couldn't play it on my rig at the time. I don't know. It was a very punishing[12] game at the time." The other participants all said that they did not recall discussing the game online, but the methods of recruitment employed ensured that all participants were, in some way, part of pre-existing gaming 'communities' (although it was not revealed to the participants who else was taking part in the study, several of them were actually linked to each other in various ways; two of the participants had been on podcasts together before, and the others were all in some way affiliated with *Games On Net*).

OTHER FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

The limits of 'participatory culture' are difficult to define. Already I have discussed the role of contributors to networks through forum posts, social network participation and conversation, but the ways players engage are far broader than this. A definition of 'participatory culture' may focus on fanfiction, machinima, mods, cosplay, blogs, websites, art projects, walkthroughs, FAQs, art, videos, and anything else that the player shares in any capacity. The number of ways in which players choose to extend their fandom, and the myriad of communities that once again interlink between these methods of appreciation in complex ways, indicate again the importance for players that their experiences and interests stemming from the game can be expressed. For example,

[11] Unfortunately, the forum threads in which these discussions may have taken place have long since been deleted.
[12] By 'punishing', David is referring specifically to the difficulties he had getting the game to run on his computer, not the difficulty of the game itself.

Nicole Lamerichs' argument that cosplay "is a form of fan appropriation that transforms, performs, and actualizes an existing story in close connection to the fan's own identity" (2011) neatly sums up the complexities of dressing up as a character from existing media. In the case of videogame cosplay, the literal embodiment of the avatar represents a complex metaphor in which the virtual body is assumed; should the player choose to 'act' out the character, their actions may represent an extension of their relationship with the figure they may have already 'played' in an entirely different context. In each of these acts of participation, the participant becomes a 'content creator', having taken existing materials and repurposed them, typically in the hope of sharing their new creation with others. According to research by Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden, as of 2005 half of all teenagers in the USA were online 'content creators', having "created a blog or webpage, posted original artwork, photography, stories or videos online or remixed online content into their own new creations" (Lenhart & Madden, 2005). These are all typical avenues through which players tell the narratives that arise from their game experiences; again, the proliferation of these acts of creation indicates the level of importance that players place on sharing their experiences and creations.

Machinima and video footage of gameplay are clear examples of content that players design with the intention of sharing, whether widely or within communities. At the time of our interview, David had uploaded five videos recorded within *GTA IV* onto YouTube, ranging in run times from 31 seconds to two and a half minutes, using features built into the PC version that allow users to record and upload videos with ease. All five of the videos are of multiplayer games that David played with friends, and were clearly edited, rather than being straight copies of gameplay, jumping between different

angles and, in some cases, matching up to the background musical track that David has provided. In an e-mail follow-up to our initial conversation, David said that his primary motive for creating the videos wasn't so much to share his exploits as to "share and show off the game engine in multiplayer", and that he only "expected them to be seen by those viewing the forum posts where (he) embedded them". Part of the appeal, he explained, was to "see how the video editor worked itself". Interestingly, he compares the experience of recording and rewatching gameplay videos to that of uncovering old family movies: "when I stumble across them, I tend to rewatch them. Sort of like finding old home videos... they're not something I return to as such, but I do smile when I go back to them." This suggests that David experiences nostalgia for the actual play experience recorded, rather than being heavily invested in the act of recording and editing the footage itself. When asked whether he considered his work to be 'machinima', he replied "in a way, sure…maybe not 'Fine Art', though". While dismissing the quality of his own work, David is also, in this instance, hinting at the idea that there is machinima that *could* be considered 'fine art', and recognising that his work is part of a wider field of fan work.

Machinima is perhaps as close as *Grand Theft Auto* can get to allowing multiple points of entry into the franchise for outsiders, the way that other series that have achieved a successful media convergence model, such as Star Wars and Batman, have (Jenkins, 2010). Video footage compiled from the game allows for a non-player to recognise many of the interesting or impressive elements of the game without playing it for themselves. It's telling that Rockstar enlisted director John Hillcoat to make a machinima for *Red Dead Redemption* around the time of that game's launch, in part because of Rockstar's history of leveraging legitimacy with Hollywood talent and of

presenting cinematic in-game trailers (as opposed to prerendered), but also because the developer recognises the worth of content created within, or using, their games. *Grand Theft Auto IV* itself has been used by machinima filmmakers in interesting ways. Mathieu Weschler's *The Trashmaster* (2011), an 88 minute film with a linear narrative set within Liberty City and made using in-game assets, was in development for over two years. The film repurposed the Niko avatar as the 'Trashmaster', a vigilante seeking justice after the strippers at his favourite strip club are murdered. It was praised on Rockstar's website, alongside several other machinima projects. Ezequiel Guerisoli, the creator of the short *GTA IV* machinima film *Mastermind: Episode 1* (2010) was offered a job at Rockstar Games because of the success and quality of his work, and currently works there as an editor and cinematographer (guerisoli.com). The video editing tools built into the PC version of *GTA IV* are clearly intended for players to share their exploits, although many of the most popular videos of the game on YouTube focus on the mods that players have developed. As of July 2015, searching for 'Grand Theft Auto IV' on YouTube returns 1,5200,000 results, while many of these results are trailers from Rockstar, the majority are videos made by fans, whether they be machinima, recordings of gameplay, video reviews, examples of mods, or other acts of participation.

Videogames frequently allow fans to engage in authorial practices that are unique to the medium – rather than simply "writing in the margins" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 155), they are able to manipulate the game itself. The saturation of broadband, video sharing sites and software has made it easier for fans to manipulate other media, re-editing scenes from television shows and movies they have downloaded online to give the scenes new context or meaning. A video of the DeLorean from *Back to the Future*, recreated within *GTA IV*, appeared on YouTube in August 2012. The video is entitled 'Grand Theft Auto

IV: Hill Valley – [Back to the Future mod showcase], and was posted by user ‘seedyrom34’. By recreating the time-travelling DeLorean, the modder has essentially repurposed the role of the game world and the avatar, and the relationship between the two, so that the end product is part homage, part role-playing experience. The video, and the modding project, aims at the intersection between *Grand Theft Auto* fans and *Back to the Future* fans, and represents a good example of a player reappropriating existing content from two franchises in order to create, and share, their talents. The person behind the video clarifies that this isn’t a singular mod, but rather represents the efforts of several people working to restructure the game’s code:

> There is no single "Download Link" for this mod. It's a HEAVILY CUSTOMIZED PC project from a die-hard BTTF and GTA fan. It took me months to tweak everything and finally get it working right but I couldn't have done it without the help of some truly great mod makers (credits/links below). Please don't just start modifying your game without researching and backing things up first. You WILL break it. (seedyrom, 2012)

This work is important, because of the evidence of considerable effort put into it. Beyond that, the collaborative efforts being shared speak to the proliferation of ‘gift economies’ amongst fan communities: the idea that fan communities are built on friendship rather than traditional market forces, and thus trade ‘gift’ capital rather than economic capital (Bonchek, 2012). The way information is freely shared, and collaborators are treated as friends, speaks to the positive potential for community members to be enriched by working together and sharing their experiences and abilities.

Jenkins states that modern participatory culture generally involves "some sort of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (2009, p. 6). As John Banks notes, "game development companies now routinely include editing and modding tools with their game release software package" (2013, p. 13) (*Grand Theft Auto IV* did not do this, although it is still a popular title to modify). The DeLorean video represents a mastery of the skills needed for the act of modding the game into an experience that evokes *Back to the Future*; the act of sharing the video, and the credits/links included with the video, places the user within a larger, collaborative sphere of participatory culture, and allows the user to act as a sort of 'mentor'. This is a common trend amongst many creators of 'fan' content, especially walkthrough and playguide writers, meaning that knowledge and skills are sought out so that they may be shared further with other fans. In this way fan communities encourage ingenuity and education, so that players can earn praise for their work and dedication.

Figure 6: A screenshot from Youtube user seedyrom 34's video of his Back to the Future mod. A cover of the movie's theme plays in the background; although heavily reminiscent of the film, everything in this video is the work of fans.

The *Grand Theft Auto* series is far from the most popular focus for fan fiction (by far the more popular series on *fanfiction.net* is *Kingdom Hearts*, a series which combines characters from the work of Disney and the videogames of *Square Enix*), but examining the works people have created and distributed online provides further insight into the ways players engage with, understand and rationalise the game world, the characters,

and the interactions between themselves and their avatars. Jana Rambusch, Tarja Susi, Stefan Ekman and Ulf Wilhelmsson state that "spending a lot of time close to a fictional character might evoke underlying processes of identification and empathy with a character, something a game itself might not always fully provide" (2009). The *Grand Theft Auto* section of fanfiction.net, as of July 2015, contains 1378 stories. Much of this thesis has concerned itself with how the player engages with the 'moral universe' of the text; fanfiction exists as an external way for players and fans to clarify their positions within, and outside of, the game world. With open world videogames such as *GTA IV*, fan fiction can also act as a more overt way of spreading or extending narratives that players have already enacted within the game world.

PRIDE IN PLAY

Videogames are often designed to be competitive, even when focused on single player, but this competition can only thrive when players are able to discuss their gaming with others. There is an element of pride in the stories that people tell about their exploits within these games; a sense that players enjoy 'bragging' about their activities within games. When a player goes online and states that a game is 'too easy', for instance, in a way they are asserting their superiority over other players who do not agree with this assessment. To put forward an opinion on the level of challenge offered by any game is to make a statement on one's own level of skill. Examining community reactions, a pertinent thread on GTAForums.com, 'Is GTA IV too easy?' (2008), stood out as a good example of how this often happens. Players who questioned whether others found the game too easy would often state their own level of skill alongside the question: the thread was opened by user 'Fuzzknuckles', who says "now, this could be because I used

to test games and have become very adept at playing - I used to get called in to work to complete games that other testers couldn't - but I was expecting more of a challenge". In that same thread, Holyhal2 outlines his own experiences with difficulty:

> I consider myself to be a fairly hardcore gamer, having been playing games since Atari 2600 days. And while I cant (sic) say that most games really challenge me to my fullest, I can say that the GTA series has always had its difficult moments.[13]

Bragging has long been an ingrained part of videogame cultures; consider, for instance, the concept of the 'console war', a term referring to the arguments between owners of different videogame capable consoles over which one was superior. While largely an act of economic justification of purchases made, arguments over consoles also indicate a degree of investment in gaming as a series of choices that speak to the personality and desires of the individual. Consoles and games are marketed towards certain audiences, and players will often take pride in choosing the systems that they think best represent who they are. The idea of taking pride in your purchasing decisions and play preferences is an ingrained part of gaming culture.

In many of these examples, the game and network designs instigated by the developers have privileged communication between players, if not necessarily within the game itself. Players share their narratives because it is, increasingly, an innate, expected part of the game experience. The fact that these players are cataloguing and preserving their gameplay experiences is important, and will have wider-reaching implications in the

[13] 'Holyhal2', http://gtaforums.com/topic/347813-is-gta-iv-too-easy/

future of Game Studies. Arguments about preservation have often focused on games themselves, and the importance of making sure that these creations are not lost; but the creativity of players themselves is also important to preserve.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

While the study of videogames could only reasonably be called 'new' in the broadest sense of the word, it is still new *enough* that there are huge areas of study that have only been explored from one angle, or which require far more research before a solid body of work emerges. This thesis has proposed the worth of studying the individual experiences of players as they reason through different understandings and forms of narrative while playing *Grand Theft Auto IV*, an 'open world' game for which player authored experience and procedurally generated narrative are frequently cited as being a huge part of the game's appeal.

Throughout this thesis I have discussed numerous aspects of the relationship between the player and the avatar, and the different forms of narrative that can emerge from the play experience of an open-world action game like *Grand Theft Auto IV*. In doing so, I hope not only to have provided an interesting study of player engagement with a single text, but to encourage further research of this nature: games research that truly values the views of the people who play and engage with the game. This is an area of study that has not yet been adequately explored: research has been conducted with game players in the past, but little has been done to recount or archive the narratives that players craft from their play experiences, even though the ability to craft these narratives is absolutely vital to the game's popularity with so many players.

By examining and gathering the unique insights of five players – players who by no means encompass the full spectrum of game players, but who more than adequately exemplify differences between each player experience – I have presented a study that emphasizes the diversity of reasoning that players exhibit when engaging with the

narrative of *Grand Theft Auto IV*. A study of this kind could be completed for any one of many game titles that encourage player creativity, and which present players with an uncommonly wide range of options for the sort of play experience they wish to have. There is room for further study into player experience with specific titles, and with more varied groups of players. Focusing on a specific title, as I have with *GTA IV*, provides a degree of focus in the differences between personal player responses that is lost when genres or franchises are considered widely. There is scope for this sort of research to explore how players from different backgrounds, races, genders and identities may approach games differently: this thesis shows that every individual player is likely to have a unique approach to how they play the game, but I hope that other researchers will expand their approach and do further work in this area.

The field of Game Studies is currently in a good position to further research player expression. As I explored in Chapter V, games and consoles are being designed more and more with the sharing of experiences in mind. David, one of my participants, has since made a career out of sharing his in-game work in *Minecraft*, in much the same way as he shared his *Grand Theft Auto IV* experience with me. The profile of streaming services like Twitch and YouTube have exploded during the writing of this thesis, and the idea of inviting others to watch you play has become a profitable industry. This is a pleasant trend in an industry in which, as John Banks puts it, "consumers are in some sense blind to the fact that they are working for cultural capital" (2013, p. 97) – modders, for instance, rarely benefit financially from their efforts unless the mods are used successfully in a portfolio, or they edit together a successful video of their mod in action. But streamers are largely entertainers, and the common ingenuity and thought processes of other players – the processes of thought and reasoning that I uncovered

through discussion with my participants – is still largely absent from Game Studies. There is plentiful room for further, related studies that examine players.

There is room for further research into player driven narrative experiences. Studying the experiences of the players interviewed for this thesis allows for a greater understanding of how players reason through the play experience: whether they value narrative consistency with the avatar, whether they invent reasoning or ignore dissonance relating to the actions they perform in the game, whether they play with the intention of sharing the experience or not. Examining the different experiences players have, and the numerous ways they understand their own experiences and craft their own personalized narratives, gives a greater understanding of how player creativity operates on an individual level. Players do not have to actively create game content to craft their own authored experiences, and each player interviewed has, to some extent, been influenced in the way they have played and talked about the game by their own understanding of *GTA IV* as a game in which they can experience and craft personal narratives.

The future of ethnographic and player observational research in Game Studies would do well to expand beyond its current focus of Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs, to embrace a wider variety of player opinions, views and experiences. The gap identified in the literature around player experiences (as outlined in the Literature Review) can be filled by further studies into players. This particular study has focused on narrative; further studies could just as easily examine how players react to, use and understand various other aspects of games.

Each of my participants was able to finish the game with a fundamentally different idea of who the characters were, what the game represented, and which emerging narratives

were important. There is no singular approach to making sense of the narrative in an open-world game. It is instead important to understand the value of player experience and ingenuity, of observing how individuals deal with narrative issues that arise during play, and understanding the player's role in deciding for themselves the direction of the characterisation and narrative, even in moments when the game isn't explicitly asking them to make choices. The prioritising of player experience in research is important, as it allows for a stronger understanding not just of how videogames are created and designed, but of how they are consumed, changed and understood. Players are not passive, and understanding how they make meaning of their experiences is fundamentally important to the study of videogames.

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