

Playing the Bad Guy: *Grand Theft Auto* in the Panopticon

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In 2003, 18-year-old Delvin Moore shot a police officer, and when arrested told police, “Life is like a video game. Everybody’s got to die sometimes.” His family and community blamed the incident on playing the game *Grand Theft Auto* (Tresniowski 97). In 2002, when a pedestrian in Grand Rapids Michigan was run down and brutally beaten by two men, the event was blamed on violent video games (Gledhill B1). A year later, when Charles McCoy Jr. was arrested for serial sniper shootings in Ohio, video games were confiscated from his home by authorities (Kidder 6B). Not long after, two teenage stepbrothers shot and killed a motorist in Tennessee, and again video games were blamed (Wadhams). Other than in their randomness, these violent crimes, would seem to have little to do with each other. Despite this, politicians and anti-video game activists have banded around these violent crimes, in order to condemn video games. The games that have come under the most scrutiny for their encouragement of violent and delinquent behavior are the *Grand Theft Auto* games (primarily, *Grand Theft Auto III*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*). California Legislator Leland Yee has recently pushed bills that would prohibit the sale of the games to minors and require retailers to keep displays of Mature games out of the reach of children (Gledhill B1). Even more vocal on the issue is Miami lawyer Jack Thompson, who has become something of an unofficial spokesperson for anti-video game legislation, going so far as to claim in a *Today Show* interview, that *Grand Theft Auto III* was used as a “murder and carjacking

simulator” (Thompson). Sparking numerous lawsuits against the video game industry, Thompson claims that, “we’ve got a tremendous surge in killings linked to these kinds of games” (Kidder 6B).

Many behavioralists and psychologists have taken great pains in recent years to examine the potentially violent ramifications of video games such as those in the *Grand Theft Auto* series. For example, in one quantitative study Brad Sheese and William Graziano insist that violent video game play, “may have negative effects on social behavior” (365). Conversely, Barrie Gunter takes a more even-handed approach and considers that there are both positive and negative effects on the behaviors of those playing violent video games (149). In this paper, I do not seek to entirely dispute these claims or suggest that there is no value to behavioralism in video game studies. Instead, I hope to offer a non-behavioralist point of view of the possible implications of video game violence.

There is no question of the violent nature of the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Each game’s avatar is a wanted criminal who has tasks involving robberies, car thefts, pimping, and murder. But on another level, *Grand Theft Auto* games also function beyond simply violence for the sake of violence—they mimic the disciplining, penal structure, and delinquency that are an integral part of the Western penal system. The games’ disciplining structure ultimately has the player assume the role of both the observing and controlling authority and the delinquent criminal, thereby reproducing and reinforcing the carceral model of power, as described by Michel Foucault.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes a system of relationships between discipline, penalty, and delinquency (290). Within Foucauldian terms, these three components work as a feedback loop, using delinquency to reaffirm power and control in a carceral society. He concludes that, “The carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation. It is, by its very nature, the apparatus of punishment that conforms most completely to the new economy of power and the instrument for the formation of knowledge that this very economy needs” (304). Thus according to Foucault we are controlled by power structures in society, which uses discipline, observation, and delinquency in order to keep the general public in line. It is these power structures that I will examine in video games in general and specifically in the *Grand Theft Auto* series.

Before looking at the *Grand Theft Auto* series specifically, I would like to discuss how video games, in general are relevant to the power structures that Foucault describes. According to Foucault, in the processes of disciplining society it is necessary to use strict systems for controlling the spatial and temporal surroundings of the subjects. By controlling the spatial and temporal environments of those being disciplined, forcing exact movements and using systems of rank and order it becomes relatively easy to discipline a subject. According to Foucault’s analysis, discipline is entirely dependent on these exercises. Combined, these elements help to alter the subjects being disciplined; their plasticity forms the boundaries of society. This process is, thus, integral to the power structures that control the carceral mechanisms of society.

Similar disciplining tactics are readily obvious in the structure of video game play. A game's controls and interface create a system that both facilitates game mastery and produces an environment where players can be easily taught and conditioned. By limiting a player's space, time, and movements video game conventions force players to play in very specific ways. As Foucault explains discipline, "...produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (138). These "docile bodies" thus lose power over their bodies but increase in "aptitude" and "capacity" (138).

One of the methods of disciplinary control that Foucault speaks of regards spatial environments. He says, "Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed upon itself. It is a protected place of disciplinary monotony" (141). Within the game playing process, there are two enclosed areas that confine players. The first is a theoretical space: the space within the context of the story's narrative. No matter how robust, all game narratives must subject themselves to a limited space: a town, a maze, a residence, etc. While all visual media has limits, the difference with a game (as opposed to film or television) is that the player is constantly testing the limitations of these walls. When watching a movie, a person is not able to attempt to look through a door or window that the director does not want the viewer to see; in a game, the harsh reality of these limitations are constantly brought to the attention of the player. Similar to many other games, these spatial limitations are readily apparent in the *Grand Theft Auto* games where many of

the spaces appear to be available to the player, who is confronted with the games' limitations when doors do not open and game graphics are not as robust.

Most popular video games are heavily dependent on space to relay their narratives. Mark J. P. Wolf discusses the implications of space in the video game environment and how it differs from other kinds of media space:

When a live action film camera is set up and pointed at something, there is always space outside the frame, off-screen, whether it is actively used or acknowledged by the film-maker or not. In a video game, not only the representation of space, but its very implication, depend on being programmed and actively created (12).

Additionally, many games use this depiction of space as part of the diegesis: for example, in all three *Grand Theft Auto* games, a map of the city is constantly displayed at the bottom of the screen with small markings indicating the locations of key places. This feature not only gives the player more control over their actions, but the games' designers more control over the player. By indicating which spaces are most advantageous it forces the user to remain within certain portions of the narrative; even if the user abandons the narrative, it is still difficult to wander to portions of the city that are not as accessible as the locations on the on screen map. An example of this is obvious in, *Grand Theft Auto III's* Liberty City (the fictional location of the game) which is constructed of three separate islands. While a player can move to other islands by subways, bridges, boats, and planes, she does not acquire the ability to do this until she has reached certain levels. Before a certain number of "missions" are completed, attempting to ride the subway sends the player a message that the subway system will open later, and a player attempting to cross a bridge to the next island will discover

that it is "under construction" until the narrative allows her to cross it. So, in addition to the dubious honor of a criminal ranking, the player is rewarded by being given more space: the ability to move about more freely as the games' narratives unfold. This alludes back to Foucault's discussion of the use of space when disciplining subjects. As the player becomes more disciplined and adept at the game, they are given more space. Space, therefore, becomes a means of both disciplining and controlling a player, as well as a system of acknowledging her acumen.

The second space which encloses the game player is physical: the space which players must use in the real world in order to play the game properly. While obviously players will have different variations depending on their situations, there are some aspects which must remain constant: the player must sit relatively still in one place; the player must watch the screen, and the player must hold the control box in a specific way. While these enclosures are not necessarily mandatory in order to play the game, they are mandatory in order to play the game *well*: it can generally be assumed that a game player who is holding controls backwards, moving from place to place and staring at the ceiling will not accomplish the goals of the game. The screen becomes a major part of this spatial encapsulation—much as it does in film or television. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovitch compares the "imprisonment" of interacting with new media with that of other visual arts, and also the increased importance of the spectator in this process. He explains, "The spectator is no longer chained, immobilized, anesthetized by the apparatus that serves her ready-made images;

now she has to work, to speak, in order to see” (109). Like film or television, the viewer is being controlled by an onscreen spectacle; unlike these forms of media (and more similar to virtual reality), games react in real-time, while maintaining the perspective of the on-screen character (Manovitch 109). This spectacle ultimately helps to reinforce the player’s encapsulation within the game.

In addition to this spatial manipulation, there is also a temporal aspect to the way a video game player is controlled. Discipline, according to Foucault, “poses the principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use...” (154). Much like space, time serves important functions both inside of the game’s narrative and in the real world of the player. Within the context of the narrative, time usually plays a key role: most activities and challenges are timed, and this calculation of time is one of the easiest ways to grade a player’s skills. But time functions even more interestingly on the user-interface side of the game. While the game’s avatar is being constantly timed and judged, the player can easily lose her sense of time through being immersed in the game (as is possible in any fictional medium). These things all add up to an interesting temporal situation: that of constant movement. In order to beat the clock, in order to master the game, the player must lose her external sense of time as a consequential sacrifice: constant movement and attention is essential to the game playing process. In her essay, “High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing *Grand Theft Auto*,” Soraya Murray comments on the absolute importance of the temporal elements in the *Grand Theft Auto* games. She explains, “Temporality does order the simulated spaces of *Grand Theft Auto*... and this is certainly one

of its most effective strategies in terms of rendering a convincing environment” (93). Thus, the realism in the *Grand Theft Auto* games (which I will examine further, later in the paper) is entirely dependent on temporal manipulation. Furthermore, Murray continues to explain that progress cannot be made in the game without subjecting oneself to the game’s temporal schema (93)—in essence, the player must allow herself to be temporally manipulated by the game.

Foucault describes precise, repetitive movements, or (as previously mentioned) the production of "docile bodies" as a key to the disciplining process:

Discipline defines each of the relations that the body must have with the object it manipulates... it consists of a breakdown of the total gesture into two parallel series: that of the parts of the body to be used (right hand, left hand, different fingers on the hand, knee, eye, elbow, etc.) and that of the parts of the object manipulated (barrel, notch, hammer, screw, etc.); then the two sets of parts are correlated together according to a number of simple gestures (rest, bend); lastly, it fixes the canonical succession in which each of these correlations occupies a particular place (152-153).

These precise movements could not better describe the process of video game playing. With console games the button structure is not necessarily automatically intuitive: it is a system that must be learned and that each system and game goes to great lengths to teach the player. For example, the Playstation 2 system has 17 buttons on it. While some of these buttons are labeled or obvious (arrows pointing in certain directions), many hold various ephemeral values: they change for each game, they change for each location within the game, and occasionally they do nothing at all. Specifically, in the *Grand Theft Auto* games, each of these buttons holds two distinct functions: actions for being inside of a car and actions for being outside of a car. While these systems are relatively similar, they require

the savvy of remembering which buttons hold which functions, and when. Conversely, in the *Katamari* games, both toggles must be used to move the avatar: a very different playing style from many other games. In order to master a game, it is therefore also essential to master each game's button system with speed and dexterity. This use of discipline where players must memorize and master game controls for each game essentially produces Foucault's "docile bodies".

Beyond the structure that the console buttons impose upon players, structure can also be found in the games' narratives. All games are based upon structure. In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan analyzes the game playing process; while his analysis is of games in general and predates video games his theories remain applicable to the video game process. According to McLuhan:

A game is a machine that can get into action only if the players consent to become puppets for a time. For individualist western man, much of his 'adjustment' to society has the character of a personal surrender to the collective demands. Our games help both to teach us this kind of adjustment and also to provide a release from it (238).

Thus, all games are about disciplining their players. But, where in traditional game-playing rules and underlying structures are not necessarily required elements, video games force structured rule patterns on the player. Additionally, according to Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, the enactment involved in the video game playing process has a deep psychological impact. She explains that, "Enacted events have a transformative power that exceeds both narrated and conventionally dramatized events because we assimilate them as personal experiences" (170). Video games therefore have an even deeper psychological

impact than what McLuhan speaks of: the game player becomes even more literally transformed in order to "surrender to the collective demands."

Many games use a ranking system which reinforces its system of rules. Similarly, Foucault posits that rank plays a large role in disciplining a subject. He explains, "Discipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them fixed positions, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations" (146). Like other forms of discipline, games have a dependence on hierarchical structure, depending on ranks corresponding to the user's diligent and exhaustive playing. For example, the *Grand Theft Auto* games use several different techniques to grade the progress of players: primarily assigning them "rank" or "respect" and "wanted" levels. On one hand a high "wanted" level will increase the chances that an avatar will be pursued and caught by the police, and, alternately a player's, "rank" or "respect" levels will gain the avatar clout with their peers in the fictional underworld. (In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* high "respect" levels will even gain the player an obedient posse of up to seven characters.) Beyond this, it is only through performing certain "tasks" (or crimes) that the player is able to progress. These tasks allow the player to move through a semi-predetermined narrative. Each game has a separate narrative plot, and within each plot the player must complete one crime or task before finding out the next part of the narrative. The *Grand Theft Auto* games are not alone in this structure; most games have some sort of ranking system with which to regulate and categorize players.

As I have shown, video game playing shares many overall similarities with the process Foucault describes as the disciplining and creation of docile bodies. How do the *Grand Theft Auto* games fit into this schema, though? The *Grand Theft Auto* games are unusual in that they not only reproduce the disciplining processes Foucault discusses; the games also reproduce penal structures and delinquency, reinforcing the entire discipline—penalty—delinquency system. The games' disciplining structure ultimately has the player assume the role of both the observing and controlling authority and the delinquent criminal, thereby reproducing and reinforcing the model of power of the Western penal system. Because of the replication of this structure, the *Grand Theft Auto* games do not just function as violence for violence sake, but produce criminals and, in effect, teach them the perils of delinquent behavior. The remainder of this paper will focus on specific themes in the *Grand Theft Auto* games that reinforce this Foucauldian model.

On a surface level, it may appear that those playing the game are learning to commit crime: *Grand Theft Auto III*, *Vice City*, and *San Andreas* are games that seem to promote murder, violence, anti-authority, sexism, prostitution, and a league of questionable values. In reality, while a player may believe that she is experiencing the untouchable life of a criminal she is, in fact, being thrown into the power structures described in *Discipline and Punish*. According to Foucault, the modern penal system does not look to correct criminal behavior but instead seeks to maintain a status quo to promote conformity. Delinquency is produced by the penal system to preserve itself:

one would be forced to suppose that the prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offences, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them; that it is not so much that they render docile those who are liable to transgress law, but that they tend to assimilate the transgression of the laws in a general tactics of subjection. (272).

By creating a system where delinquency is constantly a factor, the penal system cyclically produces and punishes criminals, assuring its existence. With this in mind, games such as those in the *Grand Theft Auto* series that, on the surface, promote violent behavior and illegal activities are able to reinforce the discipline—penalty—delinquency system that, according to Foucault, has always been in play. Narrative elements within the *Grand Theft Auto* games specifically reinforce Foucault's theories regarding the uses of delinquency in a disciplined society.

One of the key elements to understanding how this phenomenon occurs is the binary structure employed by the game. The *Grand Theft Auto* games are based entirely on a system of legal vs. illegal activities. The game seems to be promoting illegal activities, but with the constant reminder to the player that what she is doing is illegal and therefore wrong. It quickly becomes obvious to the player that her criminal behavior will get her arrested or killed (referred to in the games as being “wasted”): not entirely dissimilar to what might happen in the real world. In this way, the player is transformed into the role of the modern penal delinquent and, through punishment (death, capture, lower ranks), is taught the futility of these activities in real life. But, at another level, the player holds a more important role than simply the unruly delinquent: the player also plays a role in penalizing herself. Foucault refers to the Panopticon as a means of creating an

"uninterrupted play of calculated gazes" (177). Within the Panopticon, prisoners are constantly visible to the authorities, but these authorities are not visible to him (201). Thus:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (202-203).

The interplay of gazes—internal and external—keeps the disciplined person constantly in fear of judgment and punishment. But, unlike prisoners, soldiers, or members of other structured systems, there is no possibility that the players of *Grand Theft Auto* are being monitored by the actual gaze of an authority figure, per se—they are being monitored solely by themselves. Since the players are conditioned to respond to the external gaze, the internal gaze holds more value in this context: the players function as though being examined. During the process of monitoring their own actions, their movements within the city, their criminal ranking, and their wanted levels, players become their own disciplining authority: they watch themselves, judge themselves, and become the purveyors of their own video-game deaths. This structure is established from the onset of the game—in fact, even before the game is purchased or played there is already reinforcement of this structure.

The first and perhaps most important element of the binary legal vs. illegal theme is the game's title: *Grand Theft Auto*. Immediately, the player (or potential player) is greeted with a cultural sign from the American penal system. Since "Grand Theft Auto" is the legal name for the crime, it holds a very different value

to the player than if it were titled "stealing cars," which, in effect, holds the same meaning but is assessed differently because it does not use the actual legal terminology. Already the game has stated its pitch: the player can do something illegal and play the role of a criminal, but must always code this behavior as illegal. The title, therefore, not only suggests a taste of this particular crime, but also serves as a constant reminder that it is criminal and therefore punishable (and, of course, the punishable acts will be judged by the players, personally).

From the behavioralist point of view, the realism in the *Grand Theft Auto* games is one of its most threatening characteristics, and has the potential for creating a hazy line between real violence and game violence (Everett 322). Indeed, the games seemingly promote a realistic experience signified by minor details throughout. Small elements create this sense of false realism: cars create realistic skid marks and move in physically realistic ways, and the avatar gets tired from running too long and needs to build up his physical endurance. (In fact, in order to build up endurance in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* the avatar must frequent the gym and eat healthy foods—not entirely unlike how a player would care for a character in *The Sims!*). Soraya Murray comment's on the game's dependence on reality, explaining, "...a player's ability to act within a gaming environment is made palpable through the successful combination of image-tactility, and sound. By learning how to effectively navigate a simulated body within this manifestation, the quality of the place comes to life" (92). Thus, it is the game's realism that creates such a compelling means for playing the role of the criminal avatar.

Through playing the delinquent bad guy, the game player is given the opportunity to be an anomaly for a short period of time. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggests that delinquency is dependent on the individualization of the anomalous. He explains:

when one wishes to individualize the healthy, normal and law-abiding adult, it is always by asking him how much of the child he has in him, what secret madness lies within him, what fundamental crime he has dreamt of committing (193).

This use of the criminal individualization is unmistakable in the *Grand Theft Auto* games: they promise the decadence of crime to the (probably) law-abiding player. Additionally, the game has the potential of appealing to players who might consider delinquent behavior intriguing and can give them the opportunity of a seemingly penalty-free environment to act out these impulses. None-the-less, this image is misleading. While the player is able to work out aggression by committing crime, simultaneously the game turns the player into the judging authority. As both criminal and penalizing authority the player is constantly both committing crimes and judging herself.

Camera views are one component that reinforces the discipline—penalty—delinquency theme. Through the controller, the game player can change his viewpoint: the on-screen image can be reflected in first person (from the avatar's view) or in a variety of other points of view at varying distances from the avatar. This feature comes with numerous implications. On a cultural level, the view toggling allows the player to take on the role of a film director: not only can she control the space the avatar moves into but also the avatar's viewpoint. Additionally, the view toggle gives the player the ability to play both the roles of

the delinquent and the authority. In effect, the ability to toggle the camera angle, once again, forcing the player to identify with the avatar, but then, consequently, to view her actions from the distance of a horrified onlooker. This returns us to Foucault's "calculated play of gazes": the game player is being confronted with both the internal and external gazes at once. The player watching the avatar commit crimes from afar is utilizing the authoritative, external gaze. But, by toggling a button, the player becomes the avatar and is confronted with the internal, self-monitoring gaze. This juxtaposition serves as a constant reminder of the penal system and the methods it uses to monitor and control society.

The principle question, though, is whether the game's encouragement of player violence promotes violence in the real world. While the violence of *Grand Theft Auto* is undeniable, two structural components subtly condemn the violence in the game. The first component is the game's overall difficulty. While all games need to be challenging in order to keep an interested audience, there are certain ramifications to the game's steep learning curve. When the game player does not win, losses are usually extreme and violent: being captured by the police or being gunned down by other game characters. (In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* the player's avatar is almost immediately confronted with machine gun wielding enemies.) In addition to watching their avatar (the player's identification point) perish in these precarious situations, the player loses weapons, money, and health points. But since the player holds both the roles of the delinquent and the judging authority, there is no feeling that the avatar has not gotten what is due to him. The player understands that the crimes committed through the avatar

are heinous and unforgivable, and therefore any feelings of injustice are relative. The difficulty of the games provide a constant means of disciplining the player: while the game is showing players the fun of meaningless violence and crime, there is a distinct message that "crime doesn't pay," as such. Because the player is bound to lose far more than win, this anti-criminal element is constantly being reinforced. According to Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, a lack of closure in the gaming environment (in the *Grand Theft Auto* games represented by a never-ending string of deaths) has a dramatic implication:

The refusal of closure is always, at some level, a refusal to face mortality. Our fixation on electronic games and stories is in part an enactment of this denial of death. They offer us the chance to erase memory, to start over, to replay an event and try for a different resolution (175).

But in the case of the *Grand Theft Auto* games, this lack of conclusion seems to be both denying the reality of mortality and simultaneously forcing it on players. Ultimately, the players are able to continue until they are bored of killing and being killed. While the inevitable conclusion is almost always that the avatar will be captured or killed (forcing players to acknowledge the mortality involved in crime), the lack of ending—as Murray stated—is a denial of mortality. By continuing the game, the player continues to live in infinity and to die in infinity. This constant death on the part of the avatar is a revalidation to the player of the importance of law and order, and thus the Foucauldian model.

Finally, most games have what are known as "cheat codes": codes created in order for the programming and testing of the game which generally find their way to the public after the game is released. In the *Grand Theft Auto* games, players can cheat by getting the use of all weapons, altering the avatar's

health or "wanted" levels, or controlling other features (weather, reactions of pedestrians, level of "gore", etc.) But these codes hold only a pyrrhic value. By using the cheat codes players have abdicated the rules of the game; thereby devaluing the rewards that have not been earned. A player can not "cheat" without recognizing the game's rules, and therefore, the player, in some sense, is obeying these rules by acknowledging that there is a "right" and "wrong" way to play, and that this way is the wrong way. Because the cheating player fully identifies the illegality of the codes (both within the context of the game and in the real world), there is an overall awareness that actions occurring under these circumstances (a) are wrong and (b) could never take place outside of the game. This acknowledgment of cheating cancels out the effects of the potential violence it promotes.

Despite criticism that the *Grand Theft Auto* games are creating random violence throughout America, these claims can be questioned through viewing the game from a Foucauldian point of view. As I have shown, while on the surface *Grand Theft Auto* may appear to encourage nothing more than violence, the games simultaneously reinforce the discipline—penalty—delinquency system discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. In general, the video game process structures movements, space, and time of the players. By using the binary motif of legal vs. illegal, the player takes on the role of both the delinquent avatar and the disciplining authority: supporting and reenacting the values of the Western legal system. Foucault describes the penal system as constantly in production of delinquency—it is through this delinquency that the

system is able to survive. *Grand Theft Auto* serves a similar purpose. By allowing game players to become delinquent they monitor themselves, and ultimately reinforce the power structures of the discipline—penalty—delinquency system.

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