

## **Evaluating the Presence of Social Strain in Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto IV***

The highly successful video game industry has become synonymous, for many, with the violence and gore that many developers' games depict on screen. Over the last few decades, the industry has been accused of motivating school massacres, like those at Columbine and Virginia Tech (Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley 3), and is continually scrutinized for evidence that violence in video games stimulates aggression and antisocial behavior in adolescents. Albeit many scholars perceive the anxieties surrounding the gaming industry as the product of deviance amplification and moral panic, parental and governmental concerns may be justified considering that over 85% of games marketed towards youth contain violent actions in some form and that over half of the industry's provisions include intense violence and realistic depictions of murder (Carnagey, Anderson, and Bushman 489).

Rockstar Games' extremely popular franchise *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* is often cited as an exemplar for the video game industry's promotion of decadence and the potential threat that violent games pose to America's youth. Since the release of *GTA III* in 2001, the game has been condemned for its "sandbox" design, which allows the player to commit violent acts at leisure: often noted is the ability to pick up a prostitute, have sex with her, and subsequently kill her to retrieve the payment. Regardless of the games' controversies, much of the success of the *GTA* franchise can be attributed to the excessive amount of violence the games allow players to partake in. Similarly to the manner in which sex sells in the advertising business, vio-

lence attracts buyers in the gaming market. This tendency is evinced by the fact that when Sega and Nintendo released divergent versions of *Mortal Kombat* in 1993, the Sega release outsold Nintendo three to one apparently because it preserved the game's graphically violent features—the infamous fatality—when Nintendo strived to produce a more family-friendly product by censoring the game's intense depictions of murder (C. Anderson 145). The popularity and prevalence of violence in video games has become a major concern in academic scholarship, as researchers attempt to understand the effect media violence has on developing adolescent minds. The typical teenager spends around nine hours a week playing video games (Barlett, Anderson, and Swing 377), so the medium indubitably acts as a major socializing agent for young individuals. Because of this socializing potential, understanding violent depictions in electronic entertainment is vital research that must be conducted to deduce possible ramifications.

Much of the current research examining the causal relationship between violent video games and aggression—a behavior characterized by an individual's desire to harm another person—allocates exposure to gratuitous violence as the primary instigator (Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley 13). Over the last decade, theorists have argued that aggression arousal, imitation, the development of cognitive scripts, and desensitization (to name just a few) can accurately explicate the stimulation of aggression following an adolescent's participation in violent acts within the virtual world of video games. While all these theories give valuable insight into the possible effects violent video games have on adolescents, they simultaneously ignore an important aspect of new media: rhetoric. As Janet Murray notes, “games have not been treated as an expressive genre, such as theater, poetry, or folk songs” by academics, because they have not yet been widely defined as such (“Toward” 187). In fact, game studies (for the most part) have been confined to the fields of psychology and sociology (King and Krzywinska, *ScreenPlay* 2), and in some circles (e.g. ludologists) viewing games as an interpretive text is even seen as taboo (Miller, “Grove,” 263).

Approaches ignoring the rhetorical aspects of video games examine the medium simply as an interactive simulated experience. However, as Geoff King and Tanya Krywinska argue, “games remediate aspects of cinema (including certain forms of plotting or point-of-view structures), while cinema, in return, remediates aspects of games” (*ScreenPlay* 3). Indeed,

many games rely on pre-rendered cut-scenes to enhance the gaming experience by giving context to its action; action that in many cases is aggressive and violent. Pre-rendered cut-scenes grant the game developer a method for developing themes, characters, and plots—elements of fiction that essentially allow the developer to construct an interactive text and provide the game a with narrative structure (Howells, 110). Much time and effort is spent developing the game's story, as many game developers even hire writers and voice actors—such as Ray Liotta who played Tommy Vercetti in *GTA: Vice City*—in an effort to strengthen the game's narrative and produce a better gaming experience. So, as Marie-Laure Ryan asks: “if narrativity were totally irrelevant to the enjoyment of games, why would the designers put so much effort into the creation of a narrative interface” (602)? Narrativity is indeed an important element of a gaming experience, and should be examined as such in an effort to understand the socializing and pedagogical work games accomplish.

For this reason, I will examine the context behind the violent and criminal acts in *GTA IV* through an analysis of Rockstar Games' rhetorical strategies. By elucidating the narrative of *GTA IV*, I intend to delineate the socialization of the game's protagonist, Niko Bellic, as a means to expose the significance behind the game's portrayals of violence and crime. *GTA IV* presents Bellic as the quintessential immigrant who comes to American with lofty hopes of acquiring the American Dream and escaping the pain of a past life. However, as Paul Barrett argues, players of *GTA* quickly find themselves in a world “where the right of the individual to accumulate wealth, through any form of self-justified power, is seen as the greatest freedom” (113). Using strain theory, I will interpret the Hobbesian dystopia Rockstar Games' presents as American life in *GTA IV* as a method for explicating Bellic's motivations for criminal innovation. *GTA IV* justifies Bellic's unlawful actions by advocating the necessity of material goods within the game's plot and hypermediated interface, and romanticizes lawlessness rather than encouraging the player's conformity to societal norms.

### **Measuring the Effects of Violent Video Games**

Much of the current research concerning video game violence examines how visual images of brutality negatively affect players. David S.

Bickham states that

[f]our primary effects of violent media . . . have been consistently documented in the scientific literature: the aggressor effect is the most well[-]known—using violent media increases the likelihood that a child will think and behave aggressively toward others. The victim effect is the tendency for users of violent media to see the world as a scary and violent place promoting anxiety and protective behaviors. The bystander effect describes how violent media desensitizes its users to. . . real-life violence making them generally less likely to intervene when they witness violence. Finally, the appetite effect demonstrates that using violent media often increases children’s desire to see more violence. (53-54)

The General Aggression Model (GAM) has proven to be a useful framework for delineating the aggressor and bystander effects. The GAM, as Craig A. Anderson describes it, suggests “aggressive behavior is largely based on the activation and application of aggressive-related ideas or knowledge structures that are stored in memory” (159). Concepts that maintain a high level of interconnectivity within an individual’s mind are defined as knowledge structures (Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley 41). For example, the associative schema that delineates the cognitive process that gives meaning to the concepts *hungry*, *food*, and *eat* represent a knowledge structure that individuals use to maintain sustenance.

The potential threat that violent games pose, as suggested by the GAM, is that “a child could develop and internalize scripts for situations that trigger aggression based in part on playing violent games” (Funk 171). In theory, an individual that frequently plays *GTA IV* may slowly develop a knowledge structure that interconnects the image of a police officer with the desire to shoot and kill. Although this example may seem a bit of a stretch, much of the current research concerning the negative effects of gaming corroborates the GAM. Over the last few years, the GAM has proven to be the most influential method for determining the long-term effects of violent gaming on later aggression (Barlett, Anderson, and Swing 382). In fact, one of the first longitudinal studies on video game violence found that playing violent games was positively correlated with aggression later on in life, especially if the violent act being depicted was unjustified (Shibuya et al. 533, 536).

An additional concern surrounding the debate of video game violence is the effect it may have on an adolescent's desensitization to real violence. Nicholas L. Carnagey, Craig A. Anderson, and Brad J. Bushman observed that "playing a violent video game, even for just 20 minutes, can cause people to become less physiologically aroused by real violence" (494). Furthermore, several studies have demonstrated a negative correlation between an adolescent's exposure to violent games and his/her level of empathy (Barlett, Anderson and Swing 391). The overall findings linking violent games to an adolescent's aggressive behavior have been well demonstrated. However, as Anderson notes, "the video game industry denies any link between playing violent video games and aggression, of course, just as the TV and movie industries continue to deny violent links between their violent products and aggression" (149). It would seem the industry ignores scholarship that demonstrates a causal link between violent images and antisocial behavior in an effort to protect their investments.

Unlike the gaming industry, I do not desire to discredit previous findings on media violence. However, I would like to shift the focus away from examining only the potential effects they have on adolescents. As Christopher John Ferguson notes, "arguably the larger part of the discussion on violent video games has focused on their effects on aggressive behavior" (314). The following argument, on the other hand, attempts to move the discussion towards a fuller understanding of the violent acts being depicted within a game by examining its narrative: a transition from the visual and psychological understandings of game violence to a more expressive and sociological interpretation. King and Krzywinska argue "all games can be said to be carriers of social-cultural meanings . . . sometimes with more acute political ideologies. The moment any choices are made about what material to include [in a game]. . . particular meanings—or the potential for such meanings—are created" (*Tomb Raiders* 172). By including violence in games, video game developers formulate, either consciously or unconsciously, meanings behind the depictions of violence. It is the player's interpretation, understanding, and possible acceptance of these meanings rather than the violent images themselves that grant a violent game its power as a socializing agent.

## From Effects to Meanings: Reinterpreting Violence in *GTA IV*

Because video games are a highly interactive form of entertainment, many individuals overlook the significance behind the game's story. As leading ludologist, Gonzalo Frasca, humorously points out,

nobody really cares if Lara Croft has a kidney disease or if Mario is a bit paranoid. The monsters in *Doom* are simply mean: nobody is interested in knowing why they behave in that particular way. It may be genetic, or maybe they are just fed up with intergalactic imperialists who keep sending space marines to kill them all. (167-168)

Frasca's observation denotes a major limitation in the previous research concerning the effects of game violence on adolescents. In past scholarship, effects are only measured as a response to visual stimuli. However, a violent act is much more than a decapitation, a gunshot, or an explosion. As Tanner Higgin notes, "[t]he profound nature of the violent experience of *GTA* is not in its ability to cause aggression, rather it's that the player can be immersed in and willfully participate in a criminal world" (72). It is this sense of immersion that grants games credibility through the realistic environments the developers create. Games, as Janet Murray argues, rather than simply being simulators, act as a form of participatory theater in which the player must navigate, understand, and shape the virtual world in which they are immersed (*Hamlet* 112, 127).

Every violent act maintains an implication and has a source of motivation behind it. If a player is immersed into a violent virtual underworld, it is the ideologies that shape that world, rather than the images of blood and gore, that pose the greatest threat to developing adolescent minds because "[t]he virtual gameworld requires players to act out and internalize [its] narrative theme" (Miller, "Grove" 264). A game's narrative indubitably acts an agent of socialization. When playing a game, an individual formulates semiotic domains, and stimulates the three agents necessary for active learning: video games allow the player to understand the world from a different perspective, form new affiliations, and gain various resources that prepare the user for future learning based on the gaming experience (Gee 23). Higgin argues, "when someone plays a Grand Theft Auto game they are learning something, but how and what they are learning is still, for the most part,

elusive” (71). For this reason, research examining the effects of violence in video games needs to address the significance of the acts being depicted. As Henry Jenkins appropriately states, “we have to recognize a distinction between *effects* and *meanings*” (210, Jenkins’ emphasis).

So how do scholars delineate the meanings behind the violent acts in video games? Jenkins argues that “meanings emerge through an active process of interpretation—they reflect our conscious engagement, they can be articulated in words, and they can be critically examined” (210). To understand the meanings behind the violent acts being portrayed in video games, researchers must closely examine the acts depicted and determine a source of motivation; they must not ignore qualitative approaches to scholarship. Paul Barrett argues that

[w]hile its true that video games offer players an opportunity to role play and understand the world from another perspective, an analysis of that perspective, how it is scripted and what it excludes, seems essential to understanding what sort of pedagogical work a particular game does. These games do, after all, present stories that, while they do not claim to be factual, do play a socially formative role and have consequences that reverberate in larger political spheres. (96)

Therefore, violent acts in video games, as part of the game’s story, should be analyzed as social phenomena in an effort to determine the socializing power these perspectives potentially have on impressionable players.

### **What Does the American Dream Mean Today? The Meaning of Violence in *GTA IV***

The field of criminology provides an excellent framework for examining the significance of criminal and violent acts depicted in *GTA IV*. Criminology not only explicates the antecedents of criminal activity, but also delineates the motivation behind lawless action. As mentioned, the purpose of this article is to further the discussion of the possible effects of media violence on an adolescent’s level of aggression using a new theoretical direction that interprets the meanings behind the gaming industry’s portrayals of violence—specifically, those in *GTA IV*. I have chosen *GTA IV* as

the foundation of my argument for two reasons: First, *GTA IV* has been regularly cited in the debate concerning video game violence and its effects on adolescents, and has had a significant impact in the gaming industry by being one of the highest grossing games of all time. Secondly, meanings—as I have argued—are vital for understanding the violent images in video games. Because *GTA IV* focuses the majority of its plot on a lawless underworld, the game provides a unique medium for interpreting criminal violence. The protagonist’s motivation for entering into a world of crime grants the scholar a criminological perspective into the game’s violent acts that suggest *GTA IV* justifies and glamorizes the criminal lifestyle.

The cover art of *GTA IV* summarizes the game’s narrative:

What does the American dream mean today? For Niko Bellic fresh off the boat from Europe, it is the hope he can escape his past. For his cousin, Roman, it is the vision that together they can find fortune in Liberty City, gateway to the land of opportunity. As they slip into debt and get dragged into a criminal underworld by a series of shysters, thieves and sociopaths, they discover that the reality is very different from the dream in a city that worships money and status, and is heaven for those who have them and a living nightmare for those who don’t. (*GTA IV*)

*GTA IV*, at its very core, is a game about socialization. Bellic has come to America with the hope of finding success in “the land of opportunity” and discovers a world in which he is forced to navigate arduous social structures in an attempt to acquire it. Robert K. Merton, in his seminal work “Social Structure and Anomie,” provides a theoretical framework for understanding both the life Bellic desires and the nightmare he ultimately discovers:

It is only when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain *common* symbols of success *for the population at large* while its social structure rigorously restricts or completely eliminates access to approved modes of acquiring these symbols *for a considerable part of the same population*, that antisocial behavior ensues on a considerable scale. . . [because] frustration and thwarted aspiration lead to the search for avenues of escape from a culturally induced intolerable situation. (680, Merton’s emphasis)

While in America, Bellic is socialized to desire an opulent lifestyle; however, he does not have the proper channels to obtain it. Thus, Bellic is

induced to adjust to his strained condition by finding alternative means to fulfill his desires.

Merton delineates five coping strategies individuals use to combat social strain: conformity, innovation, ritualism, rebellion, and retreatism. Conformity, “the most common and widely diffused” class, occurs when an individual accepts both the cultural goals and the institutionalized means for acquiring the society’s aspirational references (Merton 677). Innovators, traditionally the prime interest of criminologists, accept wealth as an ultimate goal but find the conventional means of obtainment either inadequate or unavailable. The innovator commits crimes to acquire society’s aspirational references rather than adhering to societal norms. Typically, ritualists do not have the means to achieve the cultural ideals of society; however, they maintain the institutionalized norms and work diligently toward unachievable goals. Rebels reject the socialized ideal of success and substitute new goals and standards in its place. Finally, retreatists—because they perceive society’s goals as unachievable—reject both the cultural aspirations and the institutionalized means by completely dropping out of society (676).

By focusing the action of *GTA IV* on Bellic’s impeded pursuit of the American Dream, Rockstar Games presents his criminal lifestyle as the product of social strain. Socialized to strive for the symbols that equate wealth and status in American society but not given the proper means to acquire them, Bellic turns to crime as an avenue for obtaining the dream he so greatly desires. In this sense, *GTA IV* justifies the violent actions of Bellic by presenting the social world he navigates as the crucible of a strained existence that motivates criminal innovation. Rockstar Games illustrates Bellic’s criminal socialization throughout *GTA IV* using two primary channels: the game’s plot and hypermediated interface.

The plot of *GTA IV*, as noted, depicts Bellic’s pursuit of the American Dream. Many of *GTA IV*’s objectives, as in other games, are presented through pre-rendered cut-scenes that explicitly delineate goals. Once the goal is defined, the player completes the necessary action to achieve it and, in turn, is rewarded with additional cut-scenes that provide further objectives and plot development (Howells 113). Much of the dialogue presented through *GTA IV*’s cut-scenes encourages innovation and portrays crime as the best avenue for achieving Bellic’s objectives and completing the game.

The game's hypermediation, like its plot, promotes innovation by illustrating the media's barrage of socializing mediums on both the protagonist and the player. Hypermediacy, as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define it, "offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather 'windowed' itself—with windows that open on to other representations or other media" (34). *GTA IV* presents the player with a unique gaming experience in that it depicts the media surrounding Bellic (television shows, radio broadcasts, and internet dating) as socializing agents that affect the game's protagonist within a medium that ironically acts as a socializing agent itself. Both the plot and hypermediation of *GTA IV* delineate Bellic's strained existence and illustrate how the game justifies its many depictions of violence by attributing it to an anomic condition.

### **Niko Bellic's American Nightmare: Liberty City?**

A striking irony becomes apparent after a few hours of playing Rockstar Games' *GTA IV*. For a game that uses a metropolis named Liberty City as its setting, very little freedom can be found within the game's narrative. As Jenkins points out, "a richer game might offer a broader range of options—including allowing the player to go straight, get a job, and settle into the community" (218). However, *GTA IV* presents only crime as an appropriate means to success. The true autonomy of *GTA IV* stems from the game's "sandbox" design, which gives the player the agency to independently roam around Liberty City killing anyone he/she desires. In this sense, *GTA IV* strictly appeals to the natural condition of mankind that Hobbes presents as absolute freedom in his influential book, *Leviathan*: "THE RIGHT OF NATURE. . . is the liberty each man has to use his power as he wills himself, for the preservation of his own nature, that is to say, his life" (86).

Liberty, as presented in *GTA IV*, is portrayed as the player's right to steal or kill as an appropriate and efficient method for obtaining the aspirational references presented throughout the game. The positive influences of society and self-control are absent, for moral acts are typically seen as an obstruction to wealth and success in Liberty City. Furthermore, as Barrett points out, "there are no democratic representations, schools, community centers, city hall, civic buildings, or anything remotely resem-

bling a democratic, public state. There is no sense that the state can be used as protection, or offer any assistance, against the oppression” of a city ridden with strife (105). The society delineated in *GTA IV*'s Liberty City is devoid of any social solidarity, and is rampant with the state of anomie that Durkheim details in *The Division of Labor in Society* (304). Analyzing *GTA IV*'s anomic atmosphere, Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig de Peuter argue that *GTA IV*'s virtual metropolis, Liberty City, is essentially a concentrated site of neoliberalism: a market-driven economy that is “accompanied by deepening spatial segregation, marked by, on one side, ‘gated communities, urban enclaves and other “purified spaces” of social reproduction’ and, on the other, the marginalization of the urban poor” (160).

Because society is presented as ineffective and divided, many individuals living within Liberty City must search for new avenues for acquiring society's symbols of success. The upper echelon of Liberty City gained status by owning drug factories in Columbia or turning to prostitution when their major modeling contracts fell through in an effort to become *America's Next Top Hooker* (*GTA IV*). Likewise, Bellic—mimicking past characters of the *GTA* franchise—must become an “organic entrepreneur who is forced to exist outside the system. His story becomes one of learning how to circumnavigate the hostile environment and rise up in a world which he must strategically move between law and lawless” (S. Murray 96). As mentioned, *GTA IV* (at its core) is the story of Bellic's socialization in American society—specifically, an examination of the social structure that leads him to a path of crime.

Bellic's understanding of the agency every United States citizen maintains has been greatly exaggerated by his cousin's mythology of the American Dream, even before he steps foot on American soil. Bellic, discussing the allure of the United States, says that his cousin, Roman, has achieved much success in America—a nice “house, women, cars, parties”—and has been expressing his happiness to him through frequent emails (*GTA IV*). Unable to find a job in his post-war European homeland, Bellic believes he can find a new start in the United States, like his cousin, and avoid the criminal activities he has become involved in as a result of his unemployment in Europe. However, the hopes and expectations Bellic has for his new life are quickly trampled by the reality of the minority's experience in

America, and his dashed dreams are expressed early in the game's narrative.

After picking Bellic up from Liberty City's shipping port, Roman exclaims that he has had an exciting night: "Two women! The land of opportunity. I've made it!" (*GTA IV*). In an effort to get Bellic excited about his potential in America, Roman tells his naïve cousin that together "[they are] going to rule the world!" (*GTA IV*). The game's story aggrandizes the immigrant's facility in American society ironically to nullify his/her power with the dialogue that follows. Directly after Roman's exclamations, two construction workers laboring at the docks rescind the cousins' moment of hope, interjecting statements that illustrate the minority's status in America and complicating Bellic's expectations of cultural acceptance. The workers yell, "yeah, yeah, whatever, buddy. Just take over the world somewhere else, alright. . .you're in the Goddamn way" (*GTA IV*). Within minutes of the game's narrative, Bellic is presented with the reality that his experience in America is going to be socially strained. Bellic is in the way and lower than the lowest class; a mere aggregate in the capitalist society that will soon swallow him. Roman's house turns out to be a ramshackle, he is drowning in debt, and there are many places in Liberty City that the cousins should not even go for fear of being labeled a terrorist (*GTA IV*). Roman warns Bellic that "without a visa, I would stay in Broker. Fuck it, stay in Hove Beach. Everyone like us does" (*GTA IV*).

Rather than discovering a land of opportunity, Bellic is isolated from society and hindered from obtaining the dream. Bellic is segregated within an Eastern European ghetto that he cannot escape due to his ascribed status. The narrative of *GTA IV*, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argue, "is not a story of immigrant upward mobility. Bellic's life in America begins with debt, around which spins a ludic tale of informal economies and criminal capitalists, where the precarious exploit the precarious" (174). General strain theorist Robert Agnew suggests that "discrimination based on ascribed characteristics, and the failure to achieve goals such as masculine status and monetary success" within a particular community forces some groups to experience "collective strains" and become a threat to the larger community ("General Strain," 135, 131). Because American society maintains an overriding cultural aspiration for material success and cannot equally distribute permissible means to acquire such a goal, individuals that fail to

obtain the dream function unhappily within the larger social structure. As a result, strained individuals use deviant alternatives as a method for coping with their painful situation. As Stephen Jones points out, in societies “where the goal becomes unduly emphasised—as the goal of material wealth is in America—and it becomes apparent that it can be attained without using institutionalised means, then the acceptability of the means themselves will be increasingly questioned” (122).

Although Bellic begins working in Liberty City as a cab driver at his cousin’s place of employment, he quickly examines his future in Liberty City after a few minutes on the job. One of Roman’s clients asks Bellic if he is the hot shot Mediterranean millionaire Roman has told him so much about (*GTA IV*). After considering his position and potential success in Liberty City, Bellic sarcastically replies, “yeah. I traded in the yacht for this cab” and quickly informs his passenger that his cousin is delusional (*GTA IV*). Driving cabs does not provide Bellic a sense of accomplishment in America and he perceives the “chump” lifestyle it provides as inadequate (*GTA IV*). Bellic continues to understand and desire the symbols of American success—extravagance and excitement—but perceives the institutionalized means—hard work and conventional labor—as substandard. Following Bellic’s socialization at the hand of several deviant peers in his community, the naïve immigrant quickly learns that if an individual is to succeed in Liberty City he/she must be “willing to get [his or her] hands dirty. . . [because] capitalism is dirty business” (*GTA IV*).

Bellic’s first encounter with the criminal underworld of Liberty City occurs when Little Jacob, a Rastafarian drug dealer, asks him if he could protect him while mediating a turf battle. Bellic replies by stating, “I am always willing to work, if it pays” (*GTA IV*). Through Bellic’s attraction to crime and fast money, *GTA IV* depicts *conformity* as an inappropriate means for acquiring the American Dream and romanticizes *innovation*. Through the game’s rhetorical strategies, *GTA IV* argues that conformity is not as lucrative as innovation and leads only to an inadequate lifestyle. As Timothy J. Welsh suggests, “violence [in *GTA*] is thus imposed on the everyday, embellishing the day-to-day, making it fantastic and less banal. The brutal and gruesome are the entertaining, attractive, and fun parts of the game” (133-134).

A player of *GTA IV* could earn funds necessary to purchase an item for a mission by driving a cab and collecting fares—an opportunity ironically given to Bellic on the way to his second violent mission—however, the process is time-consuming and tedious. About halfway through the game, Roman informs Bellic of the difficulties of conformity: “Do you know how long it took me to get set up here? You don’t because it was easy for you. . . . It took me months to get some cash together. Finally I bought a cab and then got another, then I got the depot. . . . I slept under my desk at that place for over a year” (*GTA IV*). Bellic, on the other hand, finds financial success easily through criminal innovation. For faster access to the funds needed to progress through the game, the player of *GTA IV* could easily kill and subsequently steal the money of pedestrians on the streets of Liberty City rather than earning fares through conventional labor, the aggressive act being a more exciting and sensation-seeking action that Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl L. Olson argue draws adolescents to violent games (115).

Making money and achieving the American Dream is the ultimate goal of the *GTA* series, yet the games imply that the dream can only be appropriated through violence. Elijah Anderson argues that this “inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor—the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, limited basic public services[.], . . . the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and absence of hope” (32). Little Jacob, following Bellic’s initiation into a world of crime, argues that people often have to do things they would normally not do in an ideal world. Little Jacob states that committing a violent act “is not always an easy ting ya know[.]” and it “ain’t always logical[.]” yet insists that violence and gang connections are necessary tools for surviving in the “concrete jungle” (*GTA IV*). Little Jacob’s ideology stems from *GTA IV*’s representations of the code of the street: the unspoken precepts that govern social exchanges among the urban poor. Elijah Anderson argues that at “the heart of the code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated ‘right’ or being granted one’s ‘props’ (or proper due) or the deference one deserves” (33). Many marginalized inner-city citizens have lost respect due to a rigid social structure that acts as a barrier to obtaining aspirational references that symbolize success in America. As a result, some socially strained individuals cope with their lost dignity through innovation and appropriate respect and sta-

tus through violence. Respect is earned in the “concrete jungle” by abjuring all conventional norms, for decency and morality are considered signs of weakness in street culture (E. Anderson 100), and adopting a tough-guy exterior commands respect through a reputation for harming others. Street youth, as Elijah Anderson argues, campaign for respect by stealing the possessions of others: “When a person can take something from another and then flaunt it, he gains a certain regard by being the owner, or the controller, of that thing” (75). An individual gains respect by relieving another individual of money, significant other (or other symbol of masculine status), and/or even life.

*GTA IV* depicts the code of the street by including a respect meter that gradually increases based on Bellic’s criminal ties and the approval he gains for completing the game’s lawless missions. Elijah Anderson argues, “in the inner-city environment respect on the street may be viewed as a form of social capital that is very valuable, especially when various other forms of capital have been denied or are unavailable” (66). In this sense, Bellic achieves the American Dream in *GTA IV* by completing a violent quest in which he earns status through criminal violence and aggression. Bellic seizes the aspirational references that he was denied as a marginalized minority and commands respect by making a name for himself within Liberty City’s criminal underworld.

The society that *GTA IV* creates in its portrayal of Liberty City does not allow the player or the game’s protagonist to reject the aspirational references of wealth and respect. With a relentless barrage of socializing agents, *GTA IV* socializes both the player and Bellic to desire the American Dream yet continually undermines his/her agency to acquire it through conventional channels. As a result, *GTA IV* promotes criminal innovation. The hypermediacy of *GTA IV* provides the game a sense of verisimilitude and projects Bellic’s socially strained existence onto the player through its immersive qualities. Jason Farman argues that

with the mapping of virtual space onto material space (or vice versa), the cultural metaphor of the interface is altered so that “digital” and “material” spaces are no longer distinct, but instead inform and influence one another to the extent that the border between them appears to dissolve. The consequence of this dissolution is the imminent threat of a clear loss of borders and distinct spaces—a threat that has led to the critiques of

videogames as influencing real-world actions towards violence, drug use, and promiscuous sexuality. (98)

In addition to the threats noted in Farman's essay, the hypermediacy of *GTA IV*—the game's representations of other media—emphasizes the necessity of material wealth while simultaneously challenging both Bellic and the player's ability to successfully acquire it. To provide the player a break from engaging in criminal activities, *GTA IV* allows the player to watch television, listen to music, play on the internet, and even go on dates (often set up via email). Kiri Miller argues it is these hypermediated elements of *GTA* that give the game its "pervasive and memorable voice" as a piece of social commentary, and notes that the brief scripts the immersive details present are often the first things many players recall after finishing the game ("Jacking" 410).

The functions of radio, advertisement, and music in the *GTA* series have been well documented. Miller argues that *GTA*'s radio broadcasts "invoke and reshape players' understandings of real-world places, politics, and historical events" ("Grove" 268). The music indicates the zeitgeist for the time periods the games evoke, and perhaps perpetuates negative stereotypes concerning race and musical taste. The radio programs of Liberty City feature outrageous advertisements that expose the manipulative marketing campaigns of big business and offer the listener brutal honesty that "present[s] the appalling as if it were an unqualified good" (Annandale 97). Major organizations, such as "Burger King, De Beers, and Nike" are parodied in *GTA*'s radio advertisements (Miller, "Jacking" 403), and the various ad campaigns the games present consistently undermine the lower class' financial agency by suggesting that they are slaves to a capitalist market (Annandale 96-97). For example, the local credit card company of Liberty City, FLEECA, boasts a ludicrous interest rate "that you'll be paying off for years," and maintains the slogan: "FLEECA, it's time to start paying" (*GTA IV*). A darker advertisement for the pseudo-organization Eugenics International, Inc., informs Liberty City's audience that if they have enough money they can better society by designing the perfect baby. The poor individuals that cannot afford the procedure, the ad argues, should "drown [their 'unfortunate surprise'] in the bathtub" as a method for saving the infant from an intolerable lifestyle (*GTA IV*).

The television broadcasting available in Liberty City, like its radio networks, provides an immense amount of advertisements and continually

exposes the viewer to consumer-driven shows like *I'm Rich*, a parody of materialistic shows like MTV's *Cribs* (2000-2008) and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (1984-95). Albeit a mockery, the show continually reaffirms the necessity of the American Dream by correlating economic status to a man's virility and desirability. Similar to the methods of commercial advertisement, the show equates material possessions as important goals to obtain by vigorously associating happiness with wealth (Chia 402). *I'm Rich*, highlighting a young man who has recently found success as a rapper, states that "now [he] gets laid all the time. Which is great cause [he] was a virgin until six months ago" (*GTA IV*). By attributing the character's sexual maturity with material wealth, *GTA IV* emulates "the social pressures associated with superficial appearances and materialism" and transfers them onto the audience (S. Murray 96). Interestingly, *GTA IV* inadvertently challenges the player's masculinity using comments like those in *I'm Rich* within a medium that Valerie Walkerdine argues presents masculinity as "the achievement of game mastery through high skill levels, accompanied by actions and discourses which confirm the boy as 'on top'" (38). Players of *GTA IV* are socialized to desire the symbols of success and masculinity dangled before them, yet are consistently told that the goals they long for are only achievable through criminal innovation.

The dating experience in *GTA IV* is economically based and further develops the impeding structures that produce social strain within the game. The player of *GTA IV* quickly learns that "in America you need money to do anything"—especially if a male desires to attract female attention (*GTA IV*). Bellic is told during his first encounter with a female character that he looks "like [he] just jumped off the boat" and that if he wants to attract a classy girl he "should get some new threads" (*GTA IV*). Once again, by attributing desirability to material possessions, *GTA IV* amplifies the sense of strife within the game by tying social strain to negative relationships. Agnew et al. argue regarding strain theory that the loss of positively valued stimuli, such as a romantic partner, could produce a pressure that demands corrective action with delinquency being one possible response (44). In addition, sexual maturity is a method for gaining respect within the unspoken code of the street, as the successful conquest of female attention is viewed as a measure of a man's worth (E. Anderson 150).

*GTA IV* suggests that in order to maintain positively valued stimuli, i.e. sex, individuals must achieve the American Dream, for women only desire men with money. As a result, *GTA IV* nullifies the sexuality of many adolescents by suggesting that female attention requires wealth that is inaccessible to many; a strain perhaps more acutely tuned towards the game's pubescent audience. By displaying the effect of Bellic's ethnicity and lack of material possessions on his struggle to obtain female attention, *GTA IV* constructs an anticipated strain "that focuses on the individual's expectation that current strains will continue in the future or that new strains will be experienced" (Agnew, "Experienced" 613). *GTA IV* implies that unless an individual has the nicest clothes and the best material possessions he/she cannot function happily and will live an inadequate life. The hypermediacy of *GTA IV* supplements the story's many depictions of socialized strain and contributes to the game's justifications for criminal activities by constructing an atmosphere that consistently suggests strife is unavoidable and must be combated through innovation.

Although the plot and hypermediacy of *GTA IV* are highly satirical and could be interpreted as innocuous farce, the ambience of pure hopelessness ultimately heightens the game's anomic tone and could reinforce an adolescent's antagonistic attitudes towards conventional society. Kutner and Olson argue that some adolescents may fail to interpret the humor of *GTA IV*, as many preteens and even some young adults struggle to identify satire as a result of immature brain development (123). Furthermore, *GTA IV*'s satirical undertones, for adolescents that can successfully understand the ironies of the game's narrative, may persuade players that they will never escape an intolerable situation without financial success. In this sense, *GTA IV* constructs a social commentary in which the player can examine and interpret his/her own marginalized existence. As Higgin argues, "GTA forces a reflection on the societal sources of violence and facilitates identification with one's own contemporary frustrating battles of anxiety and desire" (79). Theresa Rogers and Kari-Lynn Winters suggest that street youth often employ the conventions of satire in an effort to express their feelings of inadequacy and aggression towards upper-class hegemony. The examples the authors provide throughout their argument closely resemble the anomic ad campaigns of *GTA IV*. For example, a poor inner-city adolescent be-  
moans: "“Slice of Pizza—\$1/ Pack of Smokes—\$7/ Bag of Weed—\$25/

Your own place to live away from the streets/FUCKING PRICELESS” (qtd. in Rogers and Winters 100). The satirical elements of *GTA IV* provide a method for interpreting Bellic’s culturally intolerable situation, and, following the player’s possible identification with the socially strained protagonist, offer him/her an avenue for expressing hostility towards conventional society. *GTA IV* forces the player’s reflection on what the American Dream means today, suggests that it is an impossible feat, and argues that success can only be achieved through violence.

### **The Effect of Meaning in *GTA IV*: New Directions for Future Scholarship**

The potential pedagogical work video games accomplish through the developer’s rhetorical strategies has often been ignored in literature examining the effects of violent games. This oversight is unfortunate, given that the meanings behind a game’s violent acts present scholars a methodology for gaining a fuller understanding concerning the possible threats violent games pose to adolescents. General strain theorists have recently become interested in examining the potential effects of vicarious and anticipated strains, and have determined that the negative feelings they generate have a causal relationship with an adolescent’s delinquent actions. Wen-Hsu Lin, John K. Cochran and Thomas Mieczkowski found that “vicarious victimization may . . . lead individuals to suspect that they will experience the same victimization in the future” (198). However, anticipated and vicarious strains and their influence on criminal behavior have yet to be examined through the medium of electronic entertainment. As Stephen W. Baron notes, “vicarious strain refers to witnessing or gaining knowledge of the negative experiences of others with whom one has a close relationship” (442). The definition of a “close relationship” has remained solely physical and, as a result, research has ignored ties with individuals that are completely fictional. Video game studies offer an opportunity to amend the previous definitions of vicarious strain. As mentioned, adolescents spend an average of nine hours a week controlling the lives of fictional characters and are constantly immersed in the ideologies that shape those characters’ lives. So I ask: Could these characters be perceived as providing close rela-

tionships? Some adolescents may spend more time with Bellic and the delinquent characters of *GTA IV* than their own real-life friends from school, and the relationships the players form with fictional characters induce their identification with the characters' struggles and successes. As Gretchen Papazian argues, "being a 'character' in the game is not enough to claim narrator status, however. The player becomes the narrator because the story experience is channeled—or focalized—through the player's experience. Again, the conventional positions of narrator and narratee collapse into each other" (454). In this sense, the player of *GTA IV* becomes Bellic and is thus led to vicariously experience his social strains.

By witnessing and struggling to overcome the noxious stimuli that impede Bellic's life, a player of *GTA IV* could experience vicarious and anticipated strains by seeing his or her own marginalized existence through Bellic's hardships. As a result, *GTA IV* could pose the threat of stimulating antisocial behaviors in players by reinforcing antagonistic attitudes towards society and others. *GTA IV*, as a game depicting social strain and innovation, stems from a long tradition of America's fascination with mobster/gang life. Elijah Anderson argues that media advocating the "fast life" (i.e. criminal innovation) has a dangerous verisimilitude by portraying "the complex problems that emerge every day on the ghetto streets" and presenting the violent code of the street as the only method self preservation (135). Like mob movies of the past, *GTA IV* could persuade individuals that identify with the socially strained to cope through innovation, because "games, like other media, are most powerful when they reinforce our existing beliefs, least effective when they challenge our values" (Jenkins 213). An individual that identifies with *GTA IV*'s anti-hero may perceive his criminal actions as an acceptable method for escaping a world that impedes his/her success. These implications are, of course, completely conjectural but provide new directions for future scholarship examining both the effects of violent games and the power of vicarious strain.

By focusing *GTA IV*'s plot and hypermediacy around Bellic's lawless pursuit of wealth, Rockstar Games ultimately produced a game that advocates the American Dream while simultaneously negating its achievement through conventional channels. In this sense, *GTA IV* challenges previous understandings of media violence by granting the game's violent acts justification rather than just striving for a horrifying effect. Upon the story's

completion, *GTA IV* appropriately sends the player an email that recapitulates the rhetoric of the game's plot and hypermediation:

Pilgrim,

Expand your horizons . . . travel the inner path that will allow you to unlock your inner spirit guide and know the full potential of earthly splendor that is your right as a GOLDEN DHARMA GOD. THESE SECRETS will allow you to read between the lines of society, physics and logic. THE MAN is trying to keep you down. He has built this world as your cage. BREAK FREE. You have been shown the gateway, walk through it.

Feel the Truth.

Live the Freedom. (*GTA IV*)

*GTA IV*—as a game about socialization—informs its audience of the secrets to success, the way to acquire the aspirations of society, and the ideologies that must be adopted as a means for surviving in the “concrete jungle.” The method, nicely stated above, is to break free of institutionalized norms and embrace humanity's natural condition that appropriates the American Dream through criminal innovation. With this understanding, I find the meanings behind the violent acts in *GTA IV* to be much more damaging than the potential effects generated only as a response to visual stimuli. Rather than just painting the streets of Liberty City with blood and gore, *GTA IV*'s narrative exposes the motivations that lead many individuals to reject societal norms and venture down a path to crime.

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