

The “Rhetorics of Play”: *Grand Theft Auto*, Agency And the Politics of Identity in the Age of Symbolic-Analytic Production

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In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action. It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner.

-Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*

In choosing our technology we become what we are, which in turn shapes our future choices. The act of choice is technologically embedded and cannot be understood as free “use” in the sense intended by instrumental theory. However, critical theory denies that “modernity” is exemplified once and for all by the type of atomistic, authoritarian, consumer oriented culture we enjoy in the West.

-Andrew Feenberg, *Critical Theory of Technology*

In 2001, *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar Games) was released to great success. Socially reviled for its glorification of criminal behavior by putting the player in the role of an up-and-coming carjacker, *Grand Theft Auto* is a brilliant free-form video game that allows the player to function within the environment of a living, breathing city with its own flow of pedestrians, traffic, and weather patterns. Despite having existed since the early eighties, video games are only recently getting serious critical attention by scholars and theorists. Much critical discussion has focused on the “virtual” nature and metaphysics of video games, yet a lot of these discussions have pre-empted the development of ideas on how video games are also ideologically invested artifacts that are reflective of certain cultural notions. In this essay, I will advance the notion that video games are ideological artifacts which have, using Brian Sutton-Smith’s terminology, a “rhetorics of play” (9) – and should be seen as rhetorical sites for cultural contestation and negotiation, not as innocuous playgrounds that can be dismissed of any political or social implications on grounds of their virtual nature. More importantly, I will use Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto III* to demonstrate that video games are playful arenas that are ideologically invested.

In the first section, using Langdon Winner’s theory on the political nature of technology, I will advance the notion that video games, as technological artifacts, cannot be seen as “neutral” and should be seen as rhetorical. In the following sections, I will discuss the methodology of my analysis, because a game as large and open-ended such as *Grand Theft Auto III* needs certain constraints placed in terms of critical analysis, as well as some examples that I think are indicative of the cultural and ideological logic behind the game. Seeing as the game is reflective of a specific cultural and social context, I will also discuss the cultural placement and marketing of the game in terms of its larger cultural placement. Following these sections, I will argue that the game’s specific environment puts the player in the “subject” position of late capitalism that allows for a refracted view on the larger cultural logic behind this form of socioeconomic organization. Moreover, I will advance the notion that computers (and the technological artifacts advanced by this medium) are epistemologically “explosive” in the way they point to alternate systems of social, economical and political organization. Finally, I will make the point that *Grand Theft Auto III* is reflective of Robert Reich’s notion of the “symbolic-analytic” nature of the work we perform in late capitalism, and how video

games in general may counter overly deterministic accounts of technology and have the potential to subvert such oppressive structures by the playful ideological critiques implicit in their game design. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to give some background about the game-play and the objectives of the game.

The player of the *Grand Theft Auto III* is put in the position of an escaped convict and criminal whose task it is to slowly make his way up to the top of the criminal underworld by doing various criminal activities and odd jobs. The player is given the ability to steal any car that appears on the screen, and has to complete various tasks such as stealing another criminal's car and equipping it with a bomb, to demanding protecting money from various business, and so forth. The structure of the game is based upon missions that can be completed, which will allow for another area of the city to open up, where more missions await. In short, the player of the video game is put in the shoes of an amoral carjacker whose criminal activities lead up to the top of the underworld. The game itself was lauded for its free-form structure that allowed the game player to complete missions in a random order throughout various parts of the city. Moreover, another aspect of the game that was deemed revolutionary was that it is open-ended: after one has completed most missions, one can still drive through the game world and do various other activities. At the same time it was praised for its innovative game design, *Grand Theft Auto* was criticized for its encouragement of criminal behavior, with various politicians using it as a prime example to tighten laws governing the sale of violent games to underage children. Despite its controversial status, as we will witness below, *Grand Theft Auto* is also critical of the culture of which it is a part.

Technology as artifact: The “Rhetorics of Play”

In *The Whale and The Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*, Langdon Winner remarks that technology and technological artifacts have “politics” built into them by way of the specific design choices made by their designers. Once adopted as part of the human life-sphere, the implementation of such technology also introduces a context of power and power choices. In other words, technology and technological artifacts are always reflective of specific political and social contexts in which they are produced and can never be seen as neutral. As an example of this Winner mentions how the highway infrastructure of New York City in the Fifties allowed for racial segregation in the use of public parks based upon the African-Americans’ dependency on public transit, in which the highway overpasses were purposefully designed too low to bar any public bus from access. Hence, Winner proposes that a critical theory of technology should pay attention to the “politics” of technological artifacts, which, in turn, “draws attention to the momentum of large-scale sociotechnical systems, to the response of modern societies to certain technological imperatives, and to the ways human ends are powerfully transformed as they are adopted to technical means” (21). According to Winner, technology is therefore always-already invested with human political and social motives that influence its function and purpose in society, and technology is capable of transforming human activities in terms of the social implications of their technical design and purpose.

Likewise, playing a video game such as *Grand Theft Auto* cannot be dismissed as a mere innocuous and playful engagement with a technology that is bereft of social and

political implications. Rather, the game play and design of video games should be seen as recursive technological spheres that also implicate the “rhetoric” of the ideological, cultural and productive forces that produced this technology. As I hope to demonstrate below, *Grand Theft Auto* represents a “rhetoric of play” where human action and agency are given meaning by our involvement in what Robert Reich calls “symbolic-analytic” production – the “manipulation of information” for financial gain. In doing so, *Grand Theft Auto* re-articulates human identity in terms of the cultural logic of “symbolic-analytic” activity, and allows us to see the “rhetoric of play” in video games as a valid form of ideological criticism that works to highlight complex notions of identity and agency outside the virtual sphere of video games. This, in turn, should prove the point that video games can be seen as cultural “texts” which are intricately bound up in a process of re-articulating our current social and economic institutions as mediated by technology.

Analytical Framework

In my analysis of *Grand Theft Auto*, I hope to prove the point that video games should be seen as playful arenas that allow us to reconfigure our relations to technology and our ontological roles as humans within the technologically determined confines of late capitalism. In turn, I hope to make the point that with a video game of such open-ended complexity as *Grand Theft Auto*, the ideological presuppositions it makes in its positioning of the player within the structures of the game, and the politics that are embedded within its design and game play, merits that a greater cultural and academic attention be paid to video games as technological artifacts invested with cultural and ideological values. But first, it will be necessary to analyze a few examples of the politics embedded with *Grand Theft Auto*, before moving onto more crucial questions of the agency of the player, and how the player’s functioning within the game world also figures as an ideological critique of the political, cultural and socioeconomic institutions in which we exist. Since the actual game is too big to analyze in its entirety, I am only giving a couple of examples below that I think are indicative of the game’s ideological critique.

Though much has been remarked about the explicitly male-centered constructions of identity within video game environments (see for example, Cassell and Jenkins’ *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer games*) and *Grand Theft Auto* certainly does not transcend this gender paradigm, I will focus my analysis on how this game addresses its player in ways that are critical of late capitalism as an ideological apparatus. Moreover, in my analysis I take to heart Marshall McLuhan’s idea that the ““content” of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium” and examine how the video game functions as a technological medium and how it effects certain “psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes” of culture (Sec. 9; Section 8). Therefore, in my analysis I am forgoing on analyzing the game in terms of its narrative or the missions of the game (its “content”), and rather will focus on the player’s ideological involvement in the logic of the video game as a “medium”. Thus, I am focusing on the way the video game positions the player within the game world (including its environment), and what can be gathered from the way the player is enabled to operate in the world and logic of the video game. In doing so, I avoid

getting too mired into the particular aspects of the narrative, and instead will address the potentiality of the game as a political technology with its own use-value and ideological positioning.

A Critique of Late Capitalism: Liberty City

Whereas most traditional video games, such as First Person Shooters (FPS) as *Quake*, *Doom*, *Duke Nukem*, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, locate their action in environments that have only a tenuous relation to our current reality, *Grand Theft Auto* explicitly asks us to become aware of the similarities between our life-world and that of the game, and thus converges the video game world with the “real” world outside. Though we are involved in the playing of a video game, the way the game’s phenomenological world is set up makes us conscious of the fact that the setting of the game is in a living, breathing city with its own dynamic patterns. Liberty city, the fictional city in which the action takes place, has its own weather patterns, traffic flow, pedestrians, gangs, law enforcement, and other architectural and structural facets that can be found in most major U.S. cities: industrial sections, upper- and lower-class neighborhoods, urban and suburban sections, commercial areas and domestic areas. In this sense, the setting of *Grand Theft Auto* reflects what we can expect to see in any large city of the U.S., and thus asks us to make connections between what we see on the screen and what we can expect to see in any major U.S. city.

As Marxist critic Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* notes, using the economic model of specific separate stages of capitalism by Ernest Mandel, capitalism inaugurates various new forms of technological machinery, such as the steam engine, the assembly line, the computer, which produce newer and more expansive forms of capitalism. According to Jameson, examples of this expansive progression is a move from “market capitalism, [to] the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and [to] our own [specific form of capitalism], wrongly called postindustrial but what might be better termed multinational, capital”, the latter of which, Jameson remarks, represents the “purest” form of capitalism, which is characterized by “a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious” (36). This latest form of “multinational” capitalism (or, in Jameson’s term, “late capitalism”), presents a shift in emphasis from “physical” labor-intensive capital to the informational nature of capital, and the rise of industries that support this particular model of capitalism, namely media and the advertising industry, as well as various high-tech computer industries that support the network of information.

In other words, late capitalism thus demonstrates, in Nicholas Negroponte’s terms in *Being Digital*, the move from “atoms to bits” (3) - the replacement of physical labor and production by informational, or symbol-intensive, production and labor associated with high-tech computer technology. Late capitalism thus initiates a move away from traditional labor-intensive (industrial) forms of capitalism (which are now located predominantly in the Third-World), and moves into the informational nature of capital, where structured networks, service-industries and “light” high-tech industries (such as silicon for computer chips) comprise the new forms of capital. In addition, late capitalism is the expanded use of multinational capital, where any corporation can

operate anywhere globally because of the easy transfer of products and goods are supported by a global infrastructure.

Jameson's model makes one aware that late capitalism's utilization of information technology has created a "smaller" world that is characterized by a reduction in "physical" space due to a more interconnected (global) logistical and informational infrastructure, as well as a more anonymous world where overwhelmingly large global socio-economic processes impact locally, such as a rise in unemployment after the overseas relocation of a multinational corporation's production plant for budgetary reasons. However, in spite of such overwhelmingly large socio-economic influences, Jameson warns against looking at the utilization of technology in strictly determinist ways, which would leave little agency on behalf of the individual who is affected by them. Instead, Jameson formulates a specific agency of the individual, where technology reveals points of resistance to the overwhelming nature of late capitalism:

The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. (37-38)

While not neutral, technology thus offers us one way of looking at this global network and the power relations that comprise it. Technology and technological structures are therefore never totally autonomous hegemonic systems that exist outside the sphere of ideology, but represent for Jameson new ways of articulation – a way for us to grasp their immediate implications to our lives and develop and take in alternative ideological positions in relation to these technologies. This, in turn, might present itself in the form of a political awareness that finds points of resistance, breaks, or fissures within such overwhelming networks, which as I hope to prove below, is the critical, political, cultural and social threshold in which *Grand Theft Auto* operates. First, it will be necessary to demonstrate the specific subject position that the player of *Grand Theft Auto* inhabits, in order to formulate how video games as technology can also help articulate the ideological position one takes in under the socio-economic system of late capitalism.

Being "Subject" – Interpellation, Advertisements and the Military-Industrial Complex

In the picture below (see Figure A), one can see a comparison with New York City's Times Square, arguably one of the most visible manifestations of late capitalism's appropriation of physical space through advertising. In its depiction of urban reality, *Grand Theft Auto* thus refers back to any major U.S. metropolitan city that is overrun by the emblems of late capitalism: we see the ads for various brands (one is reminded in a not so subtle way of Burger King in the picture below), stock exchange information or news on scrolling billboards, consumers with shopping bags, along with the debris of newspapers, foliage, as well various tire-tracks and oil slicks on the street.



Fig. A. The emblems of late capitalism

As pictures like this indicate, while our public spaces are still ours to traverse, they are increasingly overrun by the colonization of public space and the subconscious by advertising and capitalist pursuits. Moreover, the advertisements dispersed on various billboards throughout the city, demonstrate the game's subtle critique of the various ways that multinational corporations cater to our manufactured desires while at the same time also poking fun at the clueless nature of the general public. The picture below (Figure B.) displays two different advertisements that both inherently satirize and critique the social aspects of Western (late) capitalism. There is a company called "Fatburgerkid" whose duplicitous slogan "We've Got Bigger Buns" compounds the competitive ways of advertising (giving larger portions) and the way fast food is conducive to weight gain, and thus critiques how brands try to insert themselves in the public's psyche by way of non-sequitur (and asinine) slogans. Next to this is a billboard that recruits enlistment for the army. "Become a real man today!" it says below the picture of Uncle Sam in front of the American flag.



Fig. B. Interpellation and desire

The juxtaposition of these two forms of advertisement here is obvious: next to the advertisement of one of the more visible emblems of global capitalism (i.e. fast food franchises), there is the call of the military-industrial complex to become a “real man” by enlisting today. As advertisements like these indicate, the public spheres of the game world are inhabited by the not-so-subtle tactics of interpellation and desire used by capitalism and the military-industrial complex: one can only become a “real man” by enlisting in the army, similarly, you’re missing out if you don’t go for the competitive portions of FatburgerKid©. In its use of advertisements, *Grand Theft Auto* therefore articulates a critique of the position we take by the rhetoric of these advertisements: either we are a clueless consumer, or we are interpellated under the institutional gaze of the military-industrial complex, or (more scarily) we are both.

Similarly, the game also has the option of turning on any radio station in any car, which features a number of different radio ads that ridicule the various aspects of consumerism: there is, for example, the Maibatsu Monstrosity, a parody for an SUV-like car which “guzzles gas and is equipped for crossing arctic tundra”, or an ad in which a company extols the value of child labor, with a child proudly proclaiming to have made a “full dollar” that day, or the inhumane service of Petsovernight.com, which promises to deliver “little bundles of love” – packaged live animals - in a box to your door. Along with this, we find out that all of the radio stations are owned by Love media, whose satiric slogan “Remember, it’s not a conflict of interest if you own all of the radio stations!,” makes us aware of the insidious nature of media monopolies.

As is obvious, the game’s satirical tone articulates various critiques of the disastrous values embedded in global capitalism: the physiologically disastrous consequences of fast food culture, the ecological disaster of rampant energy consumption by way of oversized, rapid gas-consuming, all-terrain vehicles only used in (sub)urban environments, media monopolies like that of *Fox’s* Rupert Murdoch, *Disney*, *Clear Channel*, *Nike’s* use of child labor in Third World countries, etc. As examples like these

indicate, the game's satirizing of the game world also demonstrates the socially, culturally, and ecologically disastrous values of our own world, namely that of a late capitalist, global Western in which the hegemonic values abound in civilization. Thus, at the same time *Grand Theft Auto* asks us to consider our position as an outsider to the game world as an amoral criminal, it also displays the amoral nature of the game world and thus, that of our own world. The game world and the "real" world outside of the game are both a part of the world of late capitalism, where the images, billboards, advertisements and media of various companies display a satirical view of a society preoccupied with vapid consumption and consumerism (no matter the consequences), under the watchful governance of multinational corporations, media monopolies, and the jingoistic slogans of the military-industrial complex.

***GTA III* as Techno-Commodity: Sim Capital**

As Kline, Dyer-Witford and De Peuter have remarked in their *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture and Marketing*, most video games have cultural values embedded within their design, which in turn solidifies the ideological position of the player of the software who falls prey to the forces of marketing and consumerism which re-enforce themselves through the game's design:

In the operations of the interactive game industry, cultural, marketing, and technological circuits are coordinated to reinforce each other in the creation of the "ideal commodity" of the post-Fordist, postmodern world market – Sim Capital. Culturally, games are repeatedly constructed to allot their players subject-positions of acquisitive house-holders, market speculators, or planet-dominating warriors – ideological roles that are indispensable to the ascendant centers of the world market system. Technologically, computer and console games feed off and into a dynamic of innovation and expansion of digital systems on which the dominance of these centers depends and in which they are massively invested. Both the culture and technology of interactive games are propelled and organized by a dynamic of expanding media empires in which the principal position is that of the technocultural "consumer" relentlessly solicited and identified by high-intensity marketing techniques. (291)

Ironically, *Grand Theft Auto* is a product of the capitalist values that it ridicules in the advertisements and emblems placed throughout the game. As Kline, Dyer-Witford and De Peuter mention in the same book, Rockstar, the publisher of *Grand Theft Auto*, actively marketed the game to young adolescent males, having released a cultural product that could be said to capitalize and commoditize the rebellious and aggressive tendencies of this target demographic by way of a video game. Certainly this is also true for its follow-up *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar, 2002), which was aggressively marketed and even had its own box-set of soundtracks to be purchased separately from the game. A distinction, however, should be made between the game's cultural placement – that is, its appearance as a product, targeted to the a specific group – and the way the game functions as a "medium" culturally – its ideological presuppositions, the cultural values that it transmits through its game play and design to the player of the game. The

difference between this is seeing a video game as a “product” of capitalism in a limited and restrictive sense versus a medium that might critique the material and social circumstances from which it came. In short, the difference is in admitting that video games are a technology that comes from the values of late capitalism, but can also function as a critical medium that offers ideological critiques. In seeing this difference, one avoids the strict base-superstructure distinction made in traditional Marxist criticism, and one instead adopts the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which saw culture as a more dynamic process in which culture and material production were both involved in dialectical social and cultural transformation as a result of the introduction of new technologies.

Thus, keeping in mind this distinction, in its game play and design, *Grand Theft Auto* is different from the games that Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter mention to be emblematic of commoditized technoculture, meaning games such as *The Sims* or *Age of Empires* or *Civilization*, games which ask the player to construct complexly coded social, cultural and political systems as an objective, but where the ideological values transmitted through this codification are a priori givens integrated into their game design and not questioned. As the examples above demonstrate, *Grand Theft Auto* ridicules the limited subject-position allotted to the “privileged” consumer of late capitalism: the billboards give a sarcastic outlook on advertisements with subconsciously satirical slogans that target mass-consumerism, the radio stations are part of a media monopoly bereft of “conflicts of interests” by virtue of this monopoly, and various other useless consumer-products are advertised in a littered landscape where shop-happy consumers walk around zombie-like. If anything, the game encourages a critical perspective in which one’s participation in culture is ridiculed: why, it seems to ask, in the face of the rapid and malignant nature of such a social system, do you want to be an upstanding citizen when one can operate as a criminal and escape such inane realities of late capitalism? The answer to this question, the game suggests, is in functioning outside of late capitalism as a criminal whose existence calls into question the socio-economic fundamentals of the system.

The “Micro-physics” of Power: Desublimation and Desire in Libidinal Economies

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault examines the history of punitive institutions in order to reveal the epistemic constructions of modern scientific discourse (more specifically, psychology, criminology, forensics). After the disappearance of public bodily punishment, Foucault notes that the birth of the prison was created by an institutional urge to greater discipline for the individual in terms of expected and desirable behavior. Foucault suggests the development of a “political technology” of the body as a way to highlight the social repression of a body that is constituted of “correctable” power relations and marked by a discursive scientific discourse (25):

[P]ower relations have an immediate hold upon [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production

that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as a labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection [. . .] That is to say, there may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them. (25-26)

According to Foucault, the individual body is invested with the “micro-physics” of power by the way it has been physically and ideologically conditioned to function in desirable (read: productive) ways as inculcated by various institutional systems. Instead of a public display of power, institutional power was channeled through various social structures that enforced conformity to authority in various ways by monitoring the individual: i.e. family, education, work, the nation state, and so on (Foucault 26). In other words, to be a criminal is to function outside society’s demand for conformity to authority through the “micro-physics” of power, which asks for the sublimation or repression of our innermost psychological and human desires. Instead, these desires are channeled through a system that rewards desire in the limited terms of consumption if the conditions of the “micro-physics” of power are met. Foucault’s point that “power and knowledge relations . . . invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge” (28) can therefore also apply to the subject position of the player in *Grand Theft Auto*, and give a perspective on how the game works to subvert this ideological structuring and play around with the “micro-physics” of power and desire.

If we look at the opening of *Grand Theft Auto*, we notice that the character we end up playing in the game is that of a criminal who escapes from a prison transport in a spectacular way. This puts the player in the curious position of being a criminal from the outset, who, as Foucault would point out, would exist at the ultimate end of the nexus of power relations – the same criminal whose behavior is marked as morally, socially, politically and culturally aberrant, and whose radical desublimation of the “micro-physics” of power takes him outside the carefully controlled cultural spheres of civilization. To operate as a criminal, the game seems to suggest, is to partly escape from the social and cultural restraints of late capitalism: while the player is put into the subject-position of the criminal, the player understands that their actions are given meaning explicitly by their transgression of the dominant values of a late capitalist system. The player will still have to amass a certain amount of money in order to buy more weapons so that they can complete certain missions, but they are, from the outset, parasitic of, rather than productive within the game’s economy. The game’s design makes it that money is around every corner, yet with an ethical deliberation attached: one can run over unsuspecting pedestrians and gather the money they have in their pockets, or simply rob a person by hitting them over the head with a baseball bat or shooting them. While there is an opportunity to gather money everywhere, the ubiquity of pedestrians everywhere drives away such an impetus, because it is no longer an impossibility to gather as much money as one desires for advancing one’s consumption status. On top of this, the drive to advance one’s own economic position is reduced by the fact that one can only buy more weapons, and since this is limited, the satisfaction of consuming itself becomes a tedious task.

As Deleuze and Guattari describe in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, late capitalism inscribes us within a “libidinal” economy that holds out the promise of an

Oedipal re-unification through consumerism, yet endlessly defers this in order to achieve productive means. According to Deleuze and Guattari we all become “desiring machines” that function within a symbolic order in which a Lacanian lack – the Oedipal feeling that we are somehow “incomplete” – becomes a productive apparatus that inhibits us and is released by way of the commodification of desire:

Capitalism, through its process of production, produces an awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy or charge, against which it brings all its vast powers of repression to bear, but which nonetheless continues to act as capitalism’s limit. For capitalism constantly counteracts, constantly inhibits this inherent tendency while at the same time allowing it free rein; continually seeks to avoid reaching its limit while simultaneously tending toward that limit. Capitalism institutes or restores all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode, to rechannel persons who have been defined in terms of abstract quantities. Everything returns or recurs: States, nations, families. (34)

Instead of questioning the oppressiveness of the institutions that capture us within their structures – the late capitalist nation-state – we are inscribed with desire by late capitalism, which promises to fulfill that desire (at least temporarily) by way of offering us the diversion of consumption. I would argue that *Grand Theft Auto* operates on a similar tactic, by allowing the player to invest in this libidinal economy of late capitalism. The social, cultural and political end point at which the player’s criminal actions exist, is therefore also the *reductio ad absurdum* of this “libidinal” economy of capitalism. Though the game itself (as a product of late capitalism) therefore promises to release such frustrated libidinal desire to step outside the moral cadres of civilization in which law enforcement prevents us from such egregious violent actions, it also addresses the problem of such systems. Thus, the game might tell a person what “they want” is psychic release from such oppressive constraints, but instead it offers the criminal as a logical extreme of late capitalism. If consumption is all there is, and the player’s criminal tendencies are invested within this libidinal economy of desire, but cannot ever transcend it, the player is confronted with the restricted freedoms of their own position within late capitalism, not to speak of the questionable ethical nature of their criminal actions.

Therefore, as the criminal tendencies become pointless exercises in unrestrained ultra-violence and mindless consumerism that do nothing to change the entrenched system of late capitalism, even the promise of release within the virtual confines of that world become a mirror-like apparition of one’s own limited set of choices within that world. *Grand Theft Auto* therefore holds out the frustrated promise of a libidinal release from the “micro-politics” of power, i.e. following up on late capitalism’s endlessly deferred promise of fulfillment (through consumption), but instead points out that the logical extreme of the system of late capitalism is yet more consumption without transcending any such structures. In the picture below (Figure C), one notices that the dead bodies of pedestrians also contain an exchange-value: the money that is left over after they have been robbed or driven over by the player. Similarly, the interface of the game gives not only the health of the player, the wanted state (indicated here with one star for my transgressive acts of driving over people), but also the value of the player (in

this case, my avatar's activities translated to a total net worth of \$1,142,628) in terms of dollars. But no matter how many pedestrians I run over or rob, the value of the money will only allow me to buy more weapons. As a result, the game design enforces the notion that while the desublimation of the oppressive structures of society can be achieved through the subversion of criminal acts, these acts still reside within the restrictive spheres of late capitalism that refract such desires in terms of the game's virtual economy.



Fig. C. The Logical Extremes of Capitalism: The Virtual Value of a Life

Thus, while Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter talk about video games being the “ideal commodity” of “Sim[ulated] Capital” that re-enforces the cultural values of late capitalism and its move into informational capital (video games being a prime example of “Sim Capital”), *Grand Theft Auto*'s values cannot be seen solely in such terms. Instead, though the game, as a *product*, resides within the commodified structures of late capitalism, the *medium* of the game, its game play and design as a technology, is involved in a cultural dialogue with the ideological presuppositions of late capitalism.

In positioning the player in the role of the criminal, *Grand Theft Auto* therefore reveals a complicated dialectic to existing social structures. Although there is law enforcement that will react when they witness the player's criminal acts such as going on a shooting spree, or blowing up a certain amount of cars, the amassing of large sums of capital is more important for the player: after you have been taken into custody, you lose a small amount of money, but all the same, you are released back onto the streets. Thus, the on-screen avatar can therefore never escape the “physical” surroundings of late capitalism or the inevitable dependency upon money, because “liberty” in Liberty city

means the “freedom” that comes through having money and the transgressive acts allowed for through the game’s design.

So what to make of the subject-position of the player? Though the player in *Grand Theft Auto* is not the sublimated consumer of the libidinal and symbolic economy of late capitalism, the player is still inscribed within the economic values of late capitalism: to refuse the precepts of law and order *still* means having to pay your way out of prison. The excessive acts of the criminal can be equated with the ecologically and socially amoral structures of late capitalism: as long as one has the means, one can have the ability to be disobedient to law and order. However, it can also be added, as long as one releases these frustrated energies within the discursive spheres of a video game, a product for which one has paid a price, one remains oblivious to the larger cultural structures that are keeping one invested within the libidinal economy, and the *de jure* structural nature of late capitalism. As the argument would go, the cultural appearance of the product therefore supersedes and pre-empts the ideological critique of the video game as medium. Yet, as the following section will show, video games are an “explosive” technological medium that holds out the promise of alternate systems of social, economical and political organization

The Video game as Explosive Medium

In “The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems”, a follow-up to Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay on modern culture, Bill Nichols identifies the danger in effecting cybernetic systems in order to contain the libidinal, potentially revolutionary “explosions” inherent in such an epistemologically and ontologically charged medium as the computer. Contrasting his points with Benjamin’s idea about the revolutionary potential of cinema, Nichols remarks about the

...explosive potential [that] can be located in the computer and its cybernetic systems for the elimination of drudgery and toil, for the promotion of collectivity and affinity, for interconnectedness, systemic networking and shared decision-making, [and how] this, too, must be defused and contained by the industries of information which localize, condense, and consolidate this potential democratization of power into hierarchies of control. (124)

Thus, according to Nichols computer technology contains within itself a revolutionary potential to alleviate the suppression of a system of late capitalism by promising alternate ways of social, political and cultural organization. However, as Kline, Dyer-Witford and De Peuter have already remarked above, such visions also can be appropriated by the “industries of information”, such as those selling video games, which in turn can divert such radical potentialities. Are games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, therefore, indicative of video games as potentially ideologically destabilizing cultural artifacts, or are they merely a strategy of containment of a cultural industry steeped in late capitalism’s “colonization of Nature and the Unconscious”? The answer for this question, I believe,

relies on uncovering the technological mechanisms that are employed by video games and the subsequent effects these produce in the user.

Speaking about the effects of video games on users, Sherry Turkle has noted in *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* that the player's connection to a game is similar to that of uncovering the secret logic of the game: "the characters on its screen, their behavior, the way they respond to a player's actions – is made of logic" (68). The player's aim in interacting with a video game is therefore to uncover the hidden algorithms that guide the system of the video game. In his essay Nichols remarks that video games therefore promise the player a sense of control through the discovery of their logic, but that a computer's system ultimately denies such control, because the game's logic (its game play and design) is embedded within the codification of ROM (the read-only-memory) of the computer and the source-code of the software of the video game which cannot be altered (127). In doing so, the "simulacra" of video games replace *real* control with the *illusion* of control for the player, which, despite this, for Nichols holds out a promise of liberatory self-realization:

If there is a liberating potential in this, it clearly is not in seeing ourselves as cogs in a machine or elements of a vast simulation, but rather in seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole that is self-regulating and capable of long-term survival. At present this larger whole remains dominated by parts that achieve hegemony. But the very *apperception* of cybernetic connection, where system governs parts, where the social collectivity of mind governs the autonomous ego of individualism, may also provide the adaptive concepts needed to decenter control and overturn hierarchy. (Nichols 142; my emphasis)

Thus, what *Grand Theft Auto* highlights is that playing video games can be a highly ideological activity that can also transcend the values of the culture in which it was produced. In engaging with a video game's logic, players are involved in discovering processes that normally would fall outside of their perceptual sphere. Furthermore, Jameson's point that contemporary technology also allows for points of articulation is crucial here: engaging with a video game that develops a "rhetorics of play" by integrating the cultural logic of a system such as late capitalism into its game design also allows for a transformative realization of the player's own functioning within the logic of such discursive societal structures. Video games therefore have the potential to be complex cultural and technological "texts" (embedded in "Read-only-memory" and the software's source code) whose dynamic nature is conducive towards inspiring a player to question, or perhaps, *engage in* a dialogue with the larger cultural process surrounding them. In *Grand Theft Auto*, this convergence between the player's experiential world and that of the video game is emphasized by the ability of the player to import "skins" into the game and thus reproduce their own likeness within the game (an example of which you can find in the above screenshots), which enables the player to make more intimate connections with the role they play on-screen and the larger cultural and social processes with which the game allows them to interact. Moreover, since video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* demand active participation from the player, and in doing so encourage proprioceptive engagement (i.e. spatial and visual activities that demand a physical reaction) with the computer, these activities also encourage a reflection on how our

interaction with technology and technological artifacts function within such informational structures per se. In turn, this will necessitate that we question the division between the work we do behind our computer screens in real life, performing complex symbolic codifications based upon the algorithms of software, from the play that we engage in on that same computer

Work and Play in the “Symbolic-Analytic” Era

As I would argue, through our activities behind the computer’s screen, we are also made aware of what Robert Reich calls “symbolic-analytic” nature of the work we perform – the reshaping and re-ordering of information in exchange for financial means. As noted before, this shift has been the change from “atoms to bits”. Most jobs in Western society require the capability of using computers in order to reproduce complexly layered information by means of symbolic representation. The move from labor intensive production methods of the assembly-line of the Ford era to the technologically mediated informational means of late capitalism has also initiated a move to “symbolic-analytic” production methods by the use of computer applications. Indeed, as Aranowitz and Difazio remark in *The Jobless Future, Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work*, their study of the impact of computer technology on the workplace, this has impacted the definition of work:

Technoculture plays with the distinction between, made first by the Greeks, between work and labor . . . [I]n contrast to work in the era of mechanical reproduction, computer-mediated work eliminates most of the repetitive tasks associated with Taylorism and Fordism: a “smart” machine can interact with human intelligence as a playmate . . . Thus the distinction between work and play that characterized our collective preoccupation with scarcity throughout history is sundered. For the first time, work and play are identical in occupations besides those of artists and scientists. . . cybernetic technology not only ingresses into events, it has become an event that leaves virtually nothing untouched. (80)

Thus, Aronowitz and DiFazio remark that computer technology in the work place removes the repetitive character of the industrial era, and instead creates the highly recursive and dynamic environment of computer-mediated “symbolic-analytic” work, where work and play are no longer mutually exclusive public and private spheres. Instead, work and play are integrated within the discursive structures of new technologies such as computer software that reduce the emphasis on labor-intensive, repetitive work and move to the playful manipulation of information in “symbolic-analytic” work.

Taking this line of argument further, I would argue that the play inherent in a game such as *Grand Theft Auto* also constitutes “symbolic-analytic” activity: are our interactions with the algorithms of the video game also not highly ideologically codified activities by which we are made aware of the libidinal investment we have in the symbolic economy of late capitalism? In engaging with video games, our symbolic-analytic activities are utilized towards radical (rather than productive) ends that hold out the promise of a re-seeing of the computer as a technology that contains both constraining as well as liberatory potentials. Moreover, if we are to revalorize our “symbolic-analytic”

activities in terms of their ideological value within late capitalism, the distinction between “real” and “virtual” activities (and their subsequent effect on the physical world) should not be upheld. Though one might still be able to say that we are engaging with an activity within the virtual sphere of video game rather than the “real” world, and that there are definitive distinctions between the “virtual” and the “real”, one can also remark that the stock exchange and the world markets also rely upon the interpretation of complex algorithmic systems, and are in itself also emblems of the move toward virtual economies based upon the activities of “symbolic-analytic” workers and various computerized networks. Instead, what we can realize is that “symbolic-analytic” production (though “virtual”) can give us a view on late capitalism’s appropriation of the computer as a means of containment, but can also allow us to reconfigure our relation with the computer as a technological artifact that contains such politics. By allowing ideological criticism into “symbolic-analytic” production, a game such as *Grand Theft Auto* demonstrates that video games have the radical potential to engender ideological critiques of the way technology has been used to transform human activity in terms of productive means. Erasing the distinction between work and play, two mutually exclusive sectors of public life, video games instead can be utilized to articulate ideological critiques – because play is not happening under the gaze of productivity and socially accepted practices/ values, it allows for a re-articulation of one’s existence within these prescribed contexts.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this essay, if play with video games enables us to engage with the function of computer technology in our personal lives, our jobs, and our roles in society in culturally critical ways, then video games have the ability to counter Heidegger’s fear in *The Question Concerning Technology*, that we will all become “standing-reserves” to technology’s transformative powers: resources to be harvested by the malicious social effects of a technology utilized by hegemonic forces. In this sense, I see video games in terms of the critical framework developed in Andrew Feenberg’s *Critical Theory of Technology*, in which Feenberg attempts to open up the ideological critique of technology in more culturally and politically engaged ways. As Feenberg remarks, the question becomes how in the face of technological rationalization, we can develop a more ethically viable and politically dynamic approach to technology that takes into account both the cultural and social implications of “instrumental” notions – views that see technology as a “neutral” tool – and “substantive” notions – views that see technology as an autonomous force with overwhelming social and political consequences – yet develops “healthy” views of technology that acknowledge the dialectical nature of technology and promote ethical utilizations of technology (5). One of the ways to do so, as I have suggested above, is by engaging with the liminal, playful technological spaces and ideological interstices offered in video games, which renegotiate human identity in terms of the sphere and logic of the computer, and at the same time, also renegotiate a concomitant change through the interface of the computer, allowing the computer to gain more “human” characteristics by way of the inherent political nature of video games, which can also transfer to the sphere of human culture and production.

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