

# Grand Theft Auto V: Why we'd kill to get it

September 20 2013, by Andy Ruddock

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The just-released Grand Theft Auto V is one of the most hotly anticipated videogames of all time. But how does it inform the debate around videogame violence? Credit: Antonio Rubio

The blockbuster videogame launch of Grand Theft Auto V was met with a fanfare of confusing messages. Gamers were promised the familiar diet of salacious content: players are free, so we are told, to drive drunk and exploit sex workers.

However, experts tell us that "GTA is essentially the Sopranos of videogames". Are we being offered the same old schlock, or are fans

about to have an experience that will solidify gaming as an art form?

A more pertinent question is this: why are we being presented by these conflicting ideas, and what do they mean?

Unsurprisingly, the new title has spawned stories about real crime. In the United Kingdom, three teens have been arrested for allegedly stabbing and robbing a man as he walked home from purchasing his copy at a special midnight launch.

As ever, things are bigger and better in America. In New York, three other young men commandeered a police car, drove to a gaming store, and cut in front of 500 other customers by posing as police officers. As reporters noted, they were acting out exactly the sort of scenario that GTA V lets them rehearse.

The New Yorker magazine has weighed into the controversy. It concurs that games are art. It acknowledges that, like great literature, gaming lets us contemplate what it might be like to be other sorts of people. It agrees that there is social value in this capacity.



GTA V is the latest in the Grand Theft Auto series of video games, which are noted for their violent gameplay. Credit: SMADE Media

All the New Yorker asks is, when an online GTA V forum allegedly contains a discussion on whether players should be able to kidnap and rape women – become virtual Ariel Castros if you will – have things gone too far?

Regrettably, the New Yorker story doesn't tell us much about this alleged conversation. What happened after someone posted the wish to include sexual assault in the game? Was that person roundly criticised for abusing a title that encourages us to think about the morality of violence? Was the player taken to task for bearing attitudes that had no place in that community? There are many reasons for thinking this might have happened. To understand why, we have to think about the history of media and audiences.

Predictably, the release of GTA V reignited the wrangle over links

between gaming, crime and violence. These fears can be lanced with a simple observation: the mini crime wave around the launch has been carried by people who want to play it. GTA V is a sort of capital.

Gaming, like every medium since early cinema, is valued as a social experience. Having access to media and having access to the pleasures of friendship, community and status are one and the same. This has always been so.

In the 1920s, media researchers worried that gangster films might inspire juvenile delinquency. But when they studied teenagers watching James Cagney and crew, they discovered that being in the cinema was far more important than paying attention to what was on-screen. Kids went to the movies to be with other kids.

By the 1940s, it was becoming clear that reading the paper, listening to the radio, and watching movies was an important way of winning respect from your peers. Knowing about the latest fashion, newest stars and most controversial political events was a great way to win trust and esteem from people you cared about.

Come the 1980s, fans were using their love of cult titles – such as Star Trek and Star Wars – to build vibrant communities that only existed in relation to media. The identities they adopted in these groups more meaningful than the "proper" ones society gave them.

Gamers know all of this. Attacks on games are attacks on gamers: who they are, and how they fit into the world. The launch of GTA V isn't just the release of yet another title: it is an eagerly anticipated cultural event that dramatises significant political conflicts. Here, gamers demand the right to be heard as people who have important things to say about the world.

A brief history of 2013 underlines why games count in social imaginations. Back in March, the United States suggested that Kim Jong-Un's military strategy was inspired by Call of Duty. In January, Prince Harry was criticised for likening attacking the Taliban to playing XBox. And, of course, gaming was dragged into the post-Newtown debate about gun control in the US.

What all of this means is that the release of Grand Theft Auto V isn't about tired debates on videogames, or about kids who do desperate things to get it. It's about how videogames are vehicles for thinking about responsibility, well-being, society and its future. Beneath the apparent mayhem, the GTA V story is about how different sorts of media violence encourage introspection on what the world is like, and how we would like it to be.

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