

## The Meaning of Race and Violence in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*

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### **Abstract:**

This research study investigates how youths actually play *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and what meanings they make from it. This study finds that players use their own experiences and knowledge to interpret the game – they do not passively receive the games’ images and content. The meanings they produce about controversial subjects are situated in players’ local practices, identities and Discourse models as they interact with the game’s semiotic domain. The results suggest that scholars need to study players in naturalistic settings if they want to see what “effects” games are having on players.

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Early in the summer of 2005, newspapers and televisions across the country lit up with a brand new controversy: the top selling videogame of 2004-2005, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (*GTA: San Andreas*), was hacked, revealing “hidden scenes” where players can manipulate their avatar to have sexual intercourse with non-player characters (Goodale, 2005). This hack, called “hot coffee,” launched just the latest debate surrounding the *Grand Theft Auto* series, games in which players can steal automobiles, hire prostitutes, and join gangs. The game series, which is now pushing 40 million in global sales, is one of the most dominant media franchises of the new millennium and a cornerstone media point for millions of today’s youth. As a result of media outrage over the hack, politicians like Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton warn that “lewd and violent” games are “spiraling out of control” while media outlets prominently feature stories connecting the game to violent behavior (Associated Press, 2005a, 2005b).

Although all of the games in the *GTA* series have generated some public outcry, *GTA: San Andreas*, which takes place in fictionalized 1990s West Coast US cities, explicitly added the dimension of race to the game’s narrative, further complicating the issue. As such, the controversy surrounding *GTA: San Andreas* is situated in broader public debates about the emergence of “gangsta rap” in popular culture, which scholars characterized as a result of the political-cultural conflict between a mobilized white middle class and the youth subculture of the deindustrialized, deskilled inner-city (De Genova, 1995; Kelly, 1999; Rose, 1994). Likewise, some scholars contend hip hop has continued to provide a public voice for dispossessed young black males who lived on the margins of American society; their viewpoints shaped and informed by poverty and

institutionalized racism (hooks, 1992). If games are play spaces where players can experience an *economy of pleasure* (Gee, 2005), then does *GTA: San Andreas* provide marginalized youth spaces where they have increased agency in a semiotic system that actually matters to them? If part of the pleasure of the game is the chance to inhabit marginalized identities and vicariously experience these highly stylized lifeworlds (Habermas, 1984), how do middle-class players make sense of the experience?

This study contrasts with psychological research probing the ostensible “effects” of violent videogames in that it investigates “why [individuals] play games and what meaning games have for them”(Olsen, 2004, p. 149; c.f. Anderson & Carnagey, 2004; Anderson & Dill, 2000). But unlike “static” texts (Aarseth, 1997), *GTA: San Andreas* is a dynamic text that requires the player to actively interact with the semiotic artifact in fundamentally different ways. Some players may shoot characters or destroy property while others may simply drive around San Andreas running ambulance, taxi, or police missions. What kinds of meanings do players make of the game world? Do they see it as bearing back on their lived experiences? This research study examines three cohort groups’ experiences playing and discussing *GTA: San Andreas*, and examines how they construct meaning through the text. It investigates how these meanings are situated in social practices and how “cultural models” are employed to co-produce those meanings (Gee, 1996).

#### Literature Review: Toward a Situated Theory of Game Play

The *Grand Theft Auto* series is a somewhat curious artifact, reflective of today’s global digital media. The game world itself is neither real, nor fiction, but *hyperreal*, a

stylized rendition of 1990s California, containing a mixture of authentic and fictitious state landmarks and neighborhoods (mostly representing the Los Angeles area). And the “Los Angeles” depicted in *GTA: San Andreas* (see Figure 1) is not “any old Los Angeles” but one created by a team of developers from Dundee, Scotland, most of whom first visited California during pre-production for the game and were a little surprised that it was not as portrayed in popular media (King, personal communication, 2002). As such, *GTA: San Andreas* is a oddly global artifact, the result of a team of Scottish developers raised with the Los Angeles depicted in N.W.A. music and Spike Lee films exporting that culture back to Americans.

The controversy surrounding *GTA: San Andreas* was not exclusively directed at the game’s violent content – the game’s depictions of race also drew scrutiny and criticism from many sectors. The game’s predecessor in the series, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, had been subjected to intense criticism because of its representation of many different ethnic groups in a fictional setting resembling Miami, Florida. Representatives from Italian-American, Latino-American and Carribean-American groups were incensed at the portrayals of their communities in the game. By the time *GTA: San Andreas* was released, critics were primed to critique its rendering of the “gangsta” culture of a fictionalized early nineties-era Los Angeles, guaranteeing that the title would receive intense censure and disapproval.

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Insert Figure 1 about here.

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This criticism of *GTA: San Andreas* focused on its recapitulation of popular media's depiction of African-American males as hyper-violent and criminal. The player inhabits the character of Carl Johnson, a black man who, having left his home to escape the violence engulfing his life and community, returns to San Andreas to attend his slain mother's funeral. Immediately upon returning to San Andreas, Carl is accosted by the police, framed for a crime he did not commit, and warned that he had better stay out of trouble. The game's quest-based storyline takes the player on a violent, but heavily satirical, trip to becoming a criminal kingpin over the course of dozens of hours of game play. Players are invited to try on the personae of an inner city gang member, experiencing *some* of what it means to live in a stylized 1990s rap world. Critics charged that this portrayal of African-American and Latino communities as hubs for violence and criminality both reifies discriminatory stereotypes and provides young adolescents with negative role models.

As a game, *GTA: San Andreas* is known as an open-ended play space that provides multiple ways of interacting with the world, thereby complicating research for those who want to study the presumptive "effects" of the game on players. After the opening scene (described above), the player is handed a bicycle and told to pedal home. Afterwards, the player can do as she or he pleases. Running over, shooting, or otherwise injuring another character in the game is not required to play in the game space, but the game's narrative often mandates said actions. Game play can simply mean interacting with the rich virtual environment by racing cars, buying clothing, dancing at clubs, taking a virtual girlfriend on a date, acting as a fireman or hunting for hidden "easter eggs". However, the games' branching narrative missions often require the player to participate

in violent and harmful acts. In such missions, the game explicitly discourages the random violence with which it has been associated through the “warrant level” game mechanic and often has a punitive component for violence as the main character is relentless pursued by police and rival criminals afterwards. Thus, violence is a predominant theme in the game yet, overall, the game’s complex possibility of action and meaning is derived from a rich, expansive world with options for play that go beyond merely shooting, robbing and killing.

It is important to empirically examine a player’s actual practices instead of treating all forms play as equivalent, because the game’s fan communities have undertaken the task of exploring and cataloguing the boundaries of the game space, often “poaching” or reworking the designed intent of the text (Jenkins, 1992). For example, a popular practice within player communities is using cheat codes and hacks to explore new dimensions of the world or serve as a scaffolding for players to get past difficult challenges. However, cheats in *GTA* often open up whole new spaces and sub-games that would sometimes require many hours of play to access. Online communities feature powerful economies of information exchange that allow players to manipulate the design of the game, so that the field of play is more elaborate and involved than before.

### *Psychological Models of Meaning-Making*

In part the game’s controversy has been fueled by widely publicized psychological research that has condemned violent videogames as a cause of violence and wrongdoing. One frequently cited study declares that videogames with violence in them increase “aggression-related thoughts and feelings” while decreasing “prosocial

behavior” (Anderson & Dill, 2000). This study was notable in that its main aggression instrument measured the longevity and intensity with which participants directed a loud noise at a fictional opponent who, they had been told, was competing to do the same to them. Participants who had been playing a violent videogame made the noise an average of a few tenths of a second quicker than the control group. Mass media and professional organizations have seized upon these studies as evidence that videogames do cause violence. The American Psychological Association went so far as to say that videogames with violent components “provide a forum for learning and practicing aggressive solutions to conflict situations” (APA, 2000), belying a conviction on the part of scholars that videogames with any depictions of violence, independent of context, beget violent thoughts and actions.

Other psychological studies of aggression and videogaming raise doubts about the APA’s final verdict and alarming public proclamations. One similar study of aggression and videogames expressed bewilderment at its “failure to find the expected relationships between a preference for violent games and aggressive, externalizing behaviors” (Funk et al., 2002). These researchers were somewhat baffled by their inability to find any causal link between game play and violence, leading to a number of interesting hypotheses about why they failed to find a correlation between videogames and aggression. A meta-review of the literature found that “there is a small effect of video game play on aggression” and that strangely “there is a trend suggesting that longer playing times result in less aggression” (Sherry, 2001). This intriguing trend may suggest that as players learn to experience games, they understand their “design grammar” (c.f. Robison, 2006) and come to develop meta-cognitive understandings of how violence is represented.

Some studies were more skeptical of the relationship between violence and videogames. Durkin and Barber (2002) observed that “no evidence was obtained of negative outcomes among game players,” but that gamers did score better than non-gamers in terms of “family closeness, activity involvement, positive school engagement, positive mental health, substance use, self-concept, friendship network, and disobedience to parents” (p. 373). Likewise, an epidemiological study commissioned by the Washington state legislature found that “research evidence is not supportive of a major public concern that violent video games lead to real-life violence” (Bensley & Van Eenwyk, 2000). Few of these studies have received the media attention or continued funding that reports claiming causal links between videogames and violence have. Perhaps the lack of findings that might support such claims is not surprising given the general decrease in youth violence during the 1990s (Cook & Laub, 2001) as violent video game titles increased dramatically.

Underlying both the growing body of psychological literature on game violence is a “transmission model” of meaning making with media (c.f. Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Laswell, 1948), which holds that there is a decontextualized meaning in an artifact that triggers a set interpretation in the receiver. In contrast, many contemporary theories of communication recognize the socially and culturally situated nature of media “reception.” Researchers from these perspectives recognize meaning as the dynamic result of a person interacting with an artifact within a given context. From this perspective, it is critical for researchers to examine interactions with media in naturalistic settings for example, in order to understand the meanings that people, like the youths in this study, make in context.

### *Knowing and Meaning-Making with Texts*

The way that users or readers interact with multimodal texts to produce meaning is an enduring, problematic issue for those who study learning. Games researchers have been both blessed and cursed in that there are already well-developed, albeit complex, bodies of work that examine the relationship between meaning and semiotic artifacts. Such mature studies allow the research of games to build on already robust theories, but also raise the danger that said research will simply apply frameworks developed with older technologies in mind. Nevertheless, the question of how to conceive of meaning as a productive interaction with a text has been central to theoretical frameworks as diverse as pragmatism (Rorty, 1979; Fish, 1980), structuralism (Jakobson, 1960), and Marxism (Lukács, 2001; Jameson, 1972). Influential paradigms in North America argued that texts express meaning through objective and universal symbols which are contained entirely within (Eliot, 1950; Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946), while popular European perspectives characterized textual meaning as continually deferred through a series of signifiers – never centered, stable and present (Derrida, 1966; Barthes, 1988). While there is indeed a danger of reproducing ideological approaches to texts that are irrelevant to games, they do serve as useful starting points for thinking about how we engage in meaning making with semiotic artifacts, and game studies scholars can profit by building on (rather than reinventing) these traditions.

Eco's (1989) notion of a text's "field of meaning" productively captures the relationship between text, reader, and the range of potential meanings when the "text" is in fact a game. The way that *Grand Theft Auto*'s many possibilities draw in players and lead to unique trajectories through the space instantiates a "field of meaning" which is

delimited by both powerful social discourses and authorial intent yet expanded by the productive subjectivity of the reader. The signification of this “field” has set limits and prescribed tendencies, but at the same time the text offers the reader a “construction kit” (Eco, 1989) for assorted and divergent meaning. Texts, then, can be semiotic spaces that are rich with potential, rather than assigned, meanings, an idea reflected in videogame scholarship that considers games-as-spaces (c.f. Jenkins & Squire, 2002; Gee, 2003; Squire, 2006). For Eco, works of literature are most rewarding when they allow the reader agency in productive meaning-making, suggesting a potentially powerful framework for games researchers. However, Eco’s notion that the “open work” ultimately serves idealized aesthetic and poetic functions suggests the need for a socially situated model of meaning making.

### *Socially-situated Literacy*

Eco’s notion of the field of meaning does less to suggest how meanings are legitimated, communicated and stabilized. Early literacy theorists treated texts as fixed, essential meaning and literacy as an inherent, universal trait that structures thought, cognition and thus behavior in certain ways; however, more recent researchers have viewed literacy as a socially- and culturally- situated practice (Havelock, 1976; Goody, 1977; Ong, 1986; Street, 1993). Although it is unreasonable to suggest that print literacy has no effect on cognitive abilities and capacities – just as it would be strange to suggest that violent videogames have no effect on a player’s mind – its effects are highly dependent upon the reader’s cultural models and social literacy practices. This open reading of a text as a social practice takes place through the interplay of the text and the

players' Discourse models, or cultural models, (Gee, 1996) and local “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980). As such, this analysis also uses the framework of the New Literacy Studies, which sees interaction with texts as rooted in practice, (Gee, 1989; Gumperz, 1982; Heath, 1983; Kress, 1985; New London Group, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 1981, Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1993) to look at games-as-practices.

Print literacy can have a wide array of meanings and consequences in different settings. Different reading and writing practices, and differing cultural models of literacy, mean that literacy gets produced and enacted in different ways and in different contexts (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Indeed, research on literacy “sponsors,” illustrates how the practices and beliefs inculcated by institutional literacy agents shape and bind the uses of literacy with regards to critical thinking (Brandt, 1998). In short, the values and norms that shape and legitimize meaning-making are fundamentally *social* and enacted through Discourses (Gee, 1989; Gee, 1999). These Discourses are “forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs attitudes and social identities” or, in other words, an “identity kit.” If a technology of communication like print literacy, which the powerful economic, political and legal institutions of modern society depend upon to communicate accepted, defined meanings, has such diverse interpretations and effects based upon the Discourse model of the reader, then one might reason that videogames – a medium used almost entirely for leisure– need to be examined in social and cultural contexts before they are assigned specific cognitive roles such as fueling aggression or creating indolence.

## Methodology

This paper looks at the game play of three cohort groups of “at-risk” youths to understand their meaning-making processes and interrogate how the world of *GTA: San Andreas* is understood by its players. The interviews were conducted in focus groups, using a semi-structured format, allowing us to explore issues of concern to both participants and players. When possible, interviews were tape recorded (some participants refused to be recorded) and key sections of the tape were transcribed. In using focus group interviews, we hoped to 1) encourage participants to converse with each other so that they would talk about the game in their own usual ways, and 2) see how they produced meaning socially. Using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the interviews were then analyzed for emergent themes and frameworks.

Both authors played approximately 200 hours of *GTA*, with one playing approximately 130 hours – mostly in the central storyline – of *GTA: San Andreas* to build a richer understanding of the participant’s talk and practices. As it turned out, our ability to relate to and talk about game play experiences was a crucial aspect of building rapport with participants, who were often initially suspicious of institutionally affiliated adults, especially researchers. Additionally, we browsed online fan sites and read message boards to become familiar with what young players actually do with the game, which simultaneously broadened our understanding of the sheer scope and diversity of game play itself.

Three peer groups or cohorts of four male adolescents each participated in the study (see Table 1). All participants were selected from “at-risk” populations of school-age children in the northern Midwest, a diagnosis made by those concerned with media and videogame violence based on the children’s socioeconomic status and disaffiliation

with school.. These students shared marginalized positions in institutional discourses surrounding violence (and are indeed those “at risk”), but at the same time, they (may) have inhabited considerably varying lifeworlds and Discourses leading to differing individual and collective interpretations.

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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This focus of this study on youths, especially “at-risk” youths, has its limitations. Because of concerns about a tacit endorsement of *GTA: San Andreas*, we were not able to observe and interview these youths playing the game. Suspicious of white, middle-class researchers recording them, some parents or guardians of these young people did not want to the interviews to be videotaped. As a result, portions of the interviews with “The Athletes” and “The Casuals” rely upon hand-written notes, so their quotes are approximations. Given these limitations, this study does not claim to offer a final verdict on how youths make meaning with *GTA: San Andreas* but rather attempts to provide an outline of what future research into contentious subjects in videogaming might look like.

## Results

The results of this study are organized according to two themes that emerged in our interviews (as co-constructed by participants and interviewers): violence and race. Each cohort displayed a differing ways of playing *GTA* and distinct cultural models of race and violence.

### *Cultural Models of Violence*

*The Gamers: A culture of expertise.* The Gamers were an all-white group of sixteen- to eighteen-year olds who attended a suburban alternative school known for its high rates of absenteeism. From working or lower middle-class backgrounds, all of them had either been moved out of traditional public high schools for disciplinary or academic reasons or opted out for social reasons. They were very dedicated game players, with three out of four having completed the main storyline in the game (an estimated 150 to 200 hours of game play) and all of them having played at least three releases in the *GTA* series. This cohort, when speaking to each other and to the interviewer, talked about game play primarily in terms of challenges faced and missions accomplished, so that their way-of-being in the game space profoundly affected the meanings they took away from the game. For them, the game was an opportunity for accomplishment, which privileged gaming skills like the ability to complete missions quickly or in unconventional ways. They valued encyclopedic knowledge of various locations, names, and features in *GTA: San Andreas*. In short, this was a gaming culture of *expertise* (Squire, in press).

While theories of violence in media often treat young people as passive consumers who are easily swayed by content, the Gamers had sophisticated theories of violence in media. When asked if in-game violence could affect a person's behavior, they were all concerned that the "wrong person" could be adversely influenced by the game. However, they had different theories as to how the game might cause someone to become violent:

*Gamer 1:        Like I'm gonna run out and do this. I don't want to grab an Uzi and run around and shoot some cops, but I dunno... but it makes you more immune to the amount of violence. It's just a game*

*running around and blowing heads off people up. Sniping people heads pop off and like blood squirts out – it's kind of gory.*

*Gamer 2: I think it's less influential because it's a 3rd person game and not a 1st person shooter. Because of the angle... it's like the angle... it's different.*

Gamer 1 first rejects a theory of imitation like that advanced in psychological research on media violence (Huesmann, 1997; Anderson et al., 2003) but hypothesizes that the game could desensitize a person to violence due to the amount in the game. Gamer 2, however, then speculates that the type of embodied experiences the player has (third person view rather than first person view) may effect the extent to which they might be influenced by the game – a recently advanced hypothesis in videogame theory that looks at how players inhabit spaces (Clinton, 2004). All of The Gamers display fairly well developed notions of how aggression is or is not transferred across settings, yet they have trouble identifying the “wrong person” that might be affected by video game violence as such:

*Gamer 1: Who are these people, these violently influenced children?*

*Gamer 2: I know, because I used to babysit the kid. He was like crazy about the game and hitting his friends and all of that.*

*Gamer 3: How old was he?*

*Gamer 2: Eight.*

*Gamer 1: I don't know of many eight year-olds walking around with Grand Theft Auto. People always complain that people shouldn't be playing these games, but if the kid comes up with sixty dollars... if an eight year-old plays the game, something is wrong there.*

*Gamer 2: Try to buy it at Best Buy. Around here, Gamestop and the main places they check IDs. If you don't look old enough, they'll ask if your mom is here.*

Gamer 2 identifies a child whose periodic violent behavior, he felt, had been negatively impacted by the game. However, Gamer 1 then wants to know the context in which this behavior took place. Under the assumption that an eight year-old child shouldn't be playing the game, Gamer 1 then implies that "something is wrong" with the child's home environment if the child was able to bypass the regulatory mechanisms of game stores, find funds to purchase the game and then allowed home access to it. Gamer 2 then rejoins that it is indeed difficult for an underage person to purchase the game. The Gamers here moved from discussing the mental effects of the game to the unsupervised game play and its social gatekeepers. For them, the two topics are intertwined in a broader society-wide conversation about the game:

*Interviewer: A younger friend or niece nephew... you'd let them play?*

*Gamer 1: No I wouldn't.*

*Gamer 2: It depends. If they were a crazy child I wouldn't let them.*

*Gamer 3: If it's your family, it's easier to take it away from them than some random kid.*

*Gamer 1: It would all depend on how into it they are.*

*Gamer 2: You just play a game but if they're too into it you can probably tell if they're like 'yeah this is real.'*

*Gamer 1: The kids most influenced have no secure sense of self.*

*Gamer 2: They're looking for like to find out who they are. They can see it better by seeing what other people do. If they get involved like something like that if game is real fun for them.*

*Interviewer: But most teenagers don't know who they are yet?*

*Gamer 3: But most do... well that's true...*

*Gamer 1: It depends on how into they are. If the game is real fun for them, they'll start imitating that.*

*Gamer 3: Obsession.*

*Gamer 2: Most don't know who they are yet. Those people are the most easily influenced don't have a secure sense of self they're looking to find out who they are and are looking to see. Not that all do...*

In discussing the conditions under which they would let a person for whom they were responsible play the game, the Gamers' discussion centers on the role of identity in making negative or hurtful meanings with the game. For them, the danger is that a person might not have a "secure sense of self" – that they might be unhappy with their everyday identities – and would start to "find out who they are" from the game. Rather than viewing the game as having an undifferentiated "effect" on users, these players display concern about the context in which the game is played and the cultural models of the players.

*The Athletes: Game violence vs. "real" violence.* The Athletes were a group of thirteen to fifteen year-old African-American youths from working class families who became friends because of their shared interest in basketball. All of the Athletes were disaffiliated with school, expressing negative opinions about it and frustration with what

they perceived as unjust and too frequent disciplinary actions there. Their affinity for hip-hop music and culture was immense, and that led in part to their interest in *GTA*. The Athletes played the game differently than the Gamers: Three out of the four had played 75 hours or more of the main storyline, but much of their time spent playing the game was in social settings with friends, making it difficult to advance through the plot. When with friends, their play became more like that of the Casuals (described below) as they enacted and performed a provocative masculinity. The fact that so many of the athletes played *GTA: San Andreas* on friends' or neighbor's consoles raises interesting questions about how patterns of console ownership and differential access affects play. All of the adolescents we interviewed (including casual gamers attending our camp) had access to and had played *GTA*. However, much fewer had access to the hundreds of hours of serious play that completing *GTA: San Andreas* requires. Popular in-game activities in such settings included seeing how "wanted" by the police one could become without getting caught or showing off stunt car jumps that they had discovered. In this way, the game play of the Athletes was part directed and part free-form, depending upon the social arena in which they found themselves.

The Athletes had very different ideas about the "effects" of in-game violence than the Gamers. Unlike the Gamers, the Athletes did not think the violence in the game was realistic in any meaningful way. The characters were not realistic, the violence was not realistic and, overall, they felt the comparison of the virtual and the real trivialized the real violence they faced in their everyday lives. Because violence was a constant threat to them in their lifeworld, they saw the virtual violence in the game as clearly fictional and nearly trivial. For them, the notion that the violence in their neighborhoods, which had

very substantial and real underlying causes, would actually be caused by playing a videogame was unbelievable.

However, The Athletes also subscribed to a belief that violent media could play into violent acts for “crazy” people. When asked if they were concerned that the game would cause *anyone* to become violent, they said that they were thought that people who were “crazy” or “messed up” might become violent from playing the game. Yet, not one member of this group of adolescents, who most media researchers would consider “at-risk” to engage in violent acts after exposure to violent content, said that they knew of someone who might become violent after repeatedly playing the game. Asked if they’d allow a younger sibling or relative to play the game, all of them said that they would. One participant went so far as to say that he would let a five or six year-old child play the game if it was the child’s choice, causing his friends to erupt in laughter. The consensus view that emerged within the cohort was that a child needs to “know what’s real and what’s fake” in the game’s world before they play it. And, ultimately, the person who they considered at-risk of engaging in violent behaviors from playing the game was an undifferentiated Other – a distant, unknown threat that bordered on fictional.

What is remarkable about the Athlete’s talk of violence in the game is that it was relatively unshaped by the Conversation (Gee, 1996) – or society-wide exchange of ideas – that we have about videogames adversely affecting children, save perhaps the notion of the “crazy person.” When the Gamers spoke about violence in the game, they spoke about it in terms that we find widespread in our media, at school board meetings, in legislatures, and around water coolers, and then shaped their responses and criticisms around this mainstream discourse. In contrast, the Athletes seldom mentioned such

prevalent models of violence and games, as they did not allow these widespread notions limit their talk about the game. Instead the Athletes talked about their understanding of in-game violence in terms of their experiences and social groups.

*The Casuals: Violence as performance play.* We met Honovi via an after school gaming camp around historical gaming, where Honovi expressed his preference for *GTA: San Andreas* over historical simulation games. When we first interviewed Honovi about *GTA: San Andreas*, he surprised us with his view of the game. He said that he didn't enjoy enacting violence in the game very much. At first, he said he thought it was novel, but now he found all the gun violence "boring and dumb." This was surprising, as we were prepared to talk to Honovi about the more violent game play actions such as drive-by shootings and "gang wars". However, Honovi insisted that he preferred the less violent parts of game play, like customizing cars, or "pimping rides," competing in the numerous racing missions through the game, or completing rescue challenges as a paramedic or fireman. We talked at length about which cars and motorcycles were his favorites and discussed his preferred accessories and paint jobs. Honovi's depth of knowledge on these aspects of the game revealed that he was not kidding us; he had explored these aspects of the game more deeply than we had at first believed. Noting that he wanted to work in vehicle customization as a career, he said that he had learned about car accessories and design using the game.

The following week, we conducted a formal interview with Honovi and his friend about *GTA: San Andreas* and were surprised by Honovi's response. Here, he fed off his friend's enthusiasm for violence in the game and they talked excitedly about being able to steal cars and kill opposing gang members. In a subsequent interview, Honovi again

insisted that he seldom enacted violence in the game and that, while he did participate in the games' gang shootouts sometimes, he did not think it affected his or his friends' behavior. He talked at length about the new cars and motorcycles he had discovered along with new geographic spaces in the game, while contrasting parts of the game's cities, which are loosely based on the Los Angeles area, to their real geographic locations. While some might think that Honovi is misleading about his practices in the game, we would suggest that it is more important to examine how he performs and reinterprets the game's many intersecting semiotic systems depending upon his social context. He can use the game as a tool to participate in the Discourse of popular hip-hop culture among other teenagers, or he can use it to simulate and engage in professional practices, depending upon his setting.

For the most part, Honovi's play delineates the collective play style of the Casuals. Most of them did not own the game so they engaged with it only on a limited basis in social settings – at the homes of friends, family or neighbors. They had little interest in the intended storyline and game activities but rather in performing in the game space for their friends. According to their reports, most of their play in these situations consisted of engaging in outrageous and socially disobedient acts – driving a tank down the interstate the wrong way, for example, or “jumping” vehicles off in game services like hills or parking garages and trying to evade police who came after them as a result of their reckless driving. This defiant, sandbox-type play did still include violence, which they said mostly consisted of trying either to jump-start an in-game police chase or to compete to see who could create the biggest explosions by using weapons obtained from cheat codes. Three of the four of the group said they avoided the gangland warfare that so

troubles critics of the game. They gave a number of reasons for this: that the shooting part of the game was boring and the controls were awkward, that it made their typically permissive parents angry, or that, sometimes, they found it “creepy.” For the most part, then, game play for the Casuals was social, competitive and performative. They were most interested in exploring and expanding the boundaries of the game’s possibility space in front of their peers. Such ambiguity of play is what problematizes attempts to assign singular “effects” and meanings to games.

### *Cultural Models of Race*

How do these “at-risk” youths interpret the racial semiotics of *GTA: San Andreas*? Is their meaning making with the game akin to what critics feared?

*The Gamers: Intertextual literacy and representations of race.* Because the Gamers were from a nearly all-white suburban area, we were particularly interested about their views regarding the portrayal of young African-American and Latino young men in the game. Given the sensitive nature of approaching a homogenous group of young white men to talk about issues of race, we broached this topic with some trepidation. However, the Gamers, who had played hundreds of hours of the game, had already formulated fairly sophisticated views about how the game depicts race and were eager to discuss it.

*Interviewer:* What do you think about how race is portrayed in the game?

*Gamer 1:* I was gonna bring that up too. Your main character just got out of jail, a black dude in LA joining back up with a gang. All the gang members – the skinny guy and the fat guy – are smoking bowls and passing shit. It’s so stereotypical. Obviously.

Far from simply reproducing discriminatory discourses regarding young black men, Gamer 1 explicitly recognizes and identifies or “calls out” the negative stereotypes present in the game: the notion of a black man joining a gang and the gang members having certain character archetypes. In their talk, the Gamers recognize that these archetypes are recreations from other forms of media:

*Gamer 2: Dude all the other GTAs are stereotypical of Italian Americans and stuff. I heard that Vice City that one line that was really controversial: “Kill all the Haitians.” He was being like its genocide. It wasn’t bullshit that they just threw in there. It was controversial between those two groups. Whenever I played Vice City it was like being in the movie Scarface – the same movie, same city. They are all the same ones in Scarface. You pretty much live in the same house - it’s all down to the detail. When I played San Andreas, the first movie I thought of was “Menace II Society”. All their names are all brought from those characters.*

Significantly, Gamer 2 reads the game off of previous films that are popular in the gangsta genre, thereby producing intertextual understandings of the origins of GTA character stereotypes in popular media. Moreover, he displays that he has identified and informed himself about the controversies surrounding in-game lines of dialogue that involve Haitian-Americans in previous games in the series (see Thorsen, 2003). One Gamer went so far as to characterize *GTA: San Andreas* as a homage to films about Los Angeles gangsta culture:

*Gamer 3: They've taken the storyline, characters, the way they act and the surrounding area and made it into a game. They're trying to sell games... each gang person has... they have their own colors so that you can see a group of people. Like, if I run over there, I can kill those people but not another. Gangs are more represented by the colors [worn] than race.*

*Gamer 2: They do it more so it's obvious to the player. They're not sneaking things in.*

Here, the Gamers exhibit a theory similar to that of some games theorists – that cultural representations are “window dressings” (c.f. Koster, 2004) designed only to facilitate game play. The Gamers discourse about race is shaped by mass media discourses about racial stereotypes and representations; however, far from exemplifying the uncultured white media consumer who tacitly accepts biased portrayals of minorities, the Gamers actively identifying stereotypes with regard to race. Again, a larger Conversation about race that is remediated through the mass media provides the discursive lens for the Gamers discussion, one which here centers on representations and stereotypes. This discussion contrasted starkly with that of the Athletes.

*The Athletes: Structural representations of race.* When asked about their views on race in the game, the Athletes discussion took an entirely different direction than we expected. As white researchers with whom they were only casually acquainted, we expected the Athletes to be reticent to talk about their views of race in the game. We were entirely wrong:

*Interviewer: What do you think about how race is portrayed in the game?*

*Athlete 1: Well what do you mean?*

*Interviewer: Do you think how black and Latino people are portrayed is realistic or not?*

*Athlete 1: Yeah, I think maybe it's realistic for places like LA or the Southside, but not here.*

These responses were a little confusing to us; never for a moment had we considered the depictions of race in *GTA: San Andreas* to be realistic. When questioned on his remarks, Athlete 1 explained that the game was realistic because the starting area of the game, “Los Santos” had endemic poverty and violence like housing projects in the south side of Chicago. Quickly, he added that the game was also realistic because the in-game police were racist and corrupt. Surprised, we queried the group if this was true for their neighborhood. Athlete 1 then said that he did not think the police in their neighborhood were corrupt but that they were definitely racist. Athlete 2 interjected that their police were clearly racist and went on to relate two stories about instances in which he had been harassed by the police while playing basketball or hanging out with his friends outdoors. Athlete 4, who was a more casual player of *GTA: San Andreas* compared to the other three young men in his cohort, appeared to disagree:

*Athlete 4: The cops ain't racist...*

*Athlete 1: Yeah they are! How d' you know anyway?*

*Athlete 4: They just bust you when you run a light or hit another car or something.*

*Interviewer: Oh you're talking about in the game?*

*Athlete 4: Yeah in the game.*

*Athlete 1: Yeah.*

Athlete 4 had not played through the storyline of the game at all but had just engaged in performative “sandbox” game play in social settings. As such, he viewed the behavior of the in-game police as very rule-based and just. The others Athletes, who had played through the game’s storyline, thought the in-game narrative arc portrayed police as racist and corrupt. Surprised by the Athletes views of the police, we asked what about race in the game they considered *unrealistic*:

*Athlete 1: How you [the main character Carl Johnson] buy a nice house.*

*Interviewer: Why’s that unrealistic?*

*Athlete 1: Because it’s hard for a black man to buy a house in America.*

*Athlete 3: Yeah...*

*Athlete 1: It’s damn hard.*

Again the Athletes discussed the meanings of race in game in terms of their own experience and perceptions of racism, which for them were *structural* issues in that they had to deal with their perceptions of discriminations by legal institutions and entrenched economic systems. Issues of inequity in the housing market, which many players are not be concerned about when playing the game, are prominent in this cohort’s meaning making with the game.<sup>i</sup> When the Athletes spoke about race in the game, they did not frame their discussion with issues frequently raised in the larger social debate about the issue, nor did they adopt a language critiquing negative cultural representations. Instead, they used their own experiences to identify depictions of race in the structure of institutions in the game. Asked specifically if they thought that the game might buttress stereotypes, the Athletes all said that they were somewhat concerned about the issue but

that, for the most part, they were glad to have a game that featured hip hop music and culture and spoke to issues important to them, however indirectly. The Athlete's talk about the game in terms of their experiences is not trivial; they produce developed meanings by comparing the game with their own cultural models based on their experiences in their neighborhoods and lifeworlds.

Unlike the Athletes of the Gamers, the Casuals had simpler views of the game's depiction of race. Even though three of the Casuals were African-American, they were for the most part uninterested in discussing what they thought the game said about race. One participant said that he thought depictions of race in the game were "bad," but that he did not think about it when playing. The others agreed with the latter point and noted that most of the people who were upset about how race was shown in the game were adults. However, none of these participants would elaborate on the reasons for their feelings (or lack thereof) about the racial representations in *GTA: San Andreas*. Their disinterest in the topic may have been a result of their youth, their relative inexperience playing the game, uncertainty about their cultural identity or perhaps a general apathy toward the topic altogether.

## Discussion

Throughout our interviews, each cohort uses the game to make situated meanings that reflect their cultural models and their circumstance-specific interpretive communities. Peripheral social groups within the dominant class - white, working or middle class - enjoyed the satire of *GTA: San Andreas* but display concern about stereotypical representations of race. Conversely, participants from socially and

economically marginalized groups - African-American, working class or working poor – used the game as a framework to discuss *institutional racism* in society.<sup>ii</sup> Economic realities and larger social trends interact with these youth’s experiences and cultural models as they make meanings about race during game play. Likewise, the different cohorts reflect on their experiences with and theories about the causes of violence as they talk about violence in the game. The meanings made by these young people are not trivial, nor are they restricted by their race, culture group or socio-economic class. Rather, they create their meanings by using their situated experiences.

The ways in which meanings are made in “possibility spaces” like *GTA: San Andreas* have interesting repercussions for the study of meaning in games as well as the design of game-based learning environments and serious games. Games are not just texts that can be interpreted in different ways but rich semiotic spaces that are specifically designed to have multiple layers of meaning which in turn appeal to different audiences. This plurality of meaning is facilitated by three overlapping aspects of the game and game play: (a) differing cultural models of the world based on player’s individual or collective experiences, (b) locally-situated practices in play that are dependent upon the social identity that the player is inhabiting, and (c) the relative meaning-making possibilities designed into the game space.

### *Differing Cultural Models*

Throughout our study, the players’ cultural models guide and direct the meanings they make about the game. The Athletes brought cultural models to the game that focused on the experience of being a black man in the ideological world and, as such, interpreted game play in political and cultural ways. They were drawn to the game because they saw

it as an extension of hip-hop culture, replete with the ability to inhabit a black character in a space that had somewhat real elements of their lifeworld, like poverty and racism. However, this space also allowed them opportunities for economic empowerment, individual expression, leisurely exploration and outrageous resistance. They juxtapose the possible meanings of this space against their everyday Discourses and experiences and appropriate the resulting ideas for use in critical interpretations about their circumstances and the game itself. For example, they thought the notion that videogames could be a cause of violence was unbelievable because it was completely foreign to their cultural model and ran contrary to their lived experience. As such, a game that has been labeled a general cause of violence and racism among young people was then reappropriated by its users to reflect on injustices in the larger society (c.f. Gee, 2003).

In contrast, the Gamers brought experiences to the game that could not be easily meshed with the possibilities available in the space, so their framework for interpreting the game was mediated mainly by mass media. While the Gamers' cultural model may have been shaped by mass media discourses, their way of interpreting the semiotic space was also heavily accented by their *gaming disposition*. Their sizeable amount of experience doing side-missions, "easter egg" hunts and explorations had convinced them that the game was, in large part, a *satire* of media representations. As a narrative, they read *GTA: San Andreas* in terms of a tradition of a gangster genre in American media. As a game, they read their experiences in systemic terms, seeing ethnic character and uniform dress of the various criminal factions in the game as a mechanic to advance game play. Although nascent at best, there was some evidence that a gaming disposition,

when activated around a game with such deep social satire, opened space for these marginalized kids to critique contemporary social structure.

### *Locally-situated Play Practices*

Locally-situated play practices, in particular, players' relative expertise with *GTA: San Andreas* shape the available field of meaning so that differing levels of expertise literally made a "different" *GTA: San Andreas* available to different players. The Casuals had limited experience in the game world and thus held simple theories about the game's meaning. Again, their play consisted mostly of using cheat codes and basic driving mechanics in the game's starting area. In contrast, most of the Athletes had engaged in over a hundred hours of game play and were thus able to relate the game's representation of racism to their own cultural models to produce a pretty accurate description of the negative effects of racism in urban Los Angeles. The Gamers had each played hundreds of hours of the game and utilized this extensive expertise in the game space to produce fairly complex interpretations. As a result they were able to take obscure parts of the game storyline and intertextually reframe these narratives in relation to the urban satire subgenre of popular film.

Games are remarkably fluid artifacts, and locally-situated play practices were highly dependent upon the social circumstances in which the play (and interview) occurred. This situated nature of play is best illustrated by Honovi. When Honovi is trying to fit into the Discourse of a transgressive teenage boy to forge bonds with his friends, he co-produces a narrative of violence, masculinity and disobedience with the game. Likewise, when he wants to reside in the Discourse of a vehicle designer for a different audience, he can produce rather detailed descriptions of vehicle and vehicle

accessories in somewhat technical language, or inhabit the space as an ambulance driver reading complicated city maps to reach the nearest hospital for a parent. Ultimately, the meaning Honovi makes when he plays with the game is contingent on the identity that he assumes and the practices attendant to that identity as much as it is on the designed content of the game itself. Nonetheless, the identities available for him to inhabit are ultimately constrained by the design of the game space.

### *Game Space Possibilities*

This notion that differing levels of expertise expose different fields of meaning for players is critical for games scholars. It is quite difficult to effectively “read” *GTA: San Andreas* if you can’t steer the bicycle past the first mission (a difficult task for many first-time players). Not only do novice players not see all of the content, they cannot experience the feeling of driving into a neighborhood their actions helped “turn” against them – let alone experience what it is like to seamlessly inhabit a character or facilely manipulate controls. The meanings the player makes with the game are circumscribed by practical considerations the player’s access to the game and their proficiency as a player.

*GTA: San Andreas* is not a blank slate onto which players can reinscribe their cultural models at will. It is a designed artifact with affordances and constraints as well as possibilities and limitations. The player makes meaning in concert with the ideological world of the game through play, and play entails some form of acceptance of the semiotics of the game space, if only temporarily. Even though the game is a designed space, meaning is plural, multiple and situated because it is a *possibility space* – an open work that allows the player many potential actions and thus styles of play. The player can

choose to become a criminal kingpin, a renowned dancer in nightclubs, a custom car aficionado, an ambulance driver or weightlifter. In short, the semiotic space is rich and varied so that the player has more productive agency than even the usual reader does. Not only can players contest the dominant meanings in the space, they can also continually reconstruct the game-as-text through their *choices* in play.

Thus far, cultural critics have mostly been concerned, as were some of our participants, with the symbolic content of *GTA: San Andreas*, but few have examined how inhabiting a *socio-economic system* in the game space remediates players' understandings of phenomena outside the game. Certainly, the game has many flaws, but the ability of some players to "read" sophisticated critiques of social, political and commercial institutions suggests that the game's semiotics and overarching narrative may have more depth than its critics allow.

Scholars need to study players in naturalistic settings if we want to see what manner of meanings they are making with games or even what "effects" games are having on them. Players bring their own experience and knowledge to a game rather than passively receiving the games' images and content. The *act* of make meaning results from the situated interaction of a player's local practices, identity, Discourse models and the game's semiotic domain – four important aspects of meaning making for scholars of games to consider. In this study, the above greatly influence how players built their own theories about the game's narrative. Research that looks at decontextualized play and that refuses to acknowledge the agency of players in making meaning is ultimately insufficient. Players, especially young players, are exceptional at making diverse

meanings in complex game systems, and research should, in the very least, seek to explain rather than exclude this heterogeneity.

Table 1

*Basic Demographic Data on the Three Interview Cohorts*

<b>Cohorts</b>	<b># players</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
The "Casuals"	4	9-12	Predominantly African-American	Non-dominant cultural group, Not school-affiliating
The "Athletes"	4	13-15	African-American	Non-dominant cultural group, Not school-affiliating
The "Gamers"	4	16-18	European-American	Dominant cultural group, Socially marginalized



Figure 1

*Players navigate the streets of San Fierro.*

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> A wealth of scholarly literature on economic disparity produced conclusions similar to that of the Athletes regarding the housing market (Oliver & Shapiro, 1994; Massey & Denton, 1993; Conley, 1999). Many sociologists and economists consider the disparities in home ownership to be the predominant factor in educational and economic inequality.

<sup>ii</sup> The ideas of the two groups reflect differing theories of race and racism in sociology throughout the latter part of the twentieth century (Omi & Winant, 1994). Theories either treated racism as a symbolic problem – simply stereotypes and prejudices associated with skin color – or a structural one whose roots lay in political and economic institutions as well as the class structure of society. Omi & Winant’s notion of *racial formation theory* bridges the divide, defining race simply as “a matter of both social structure and cultural representation” (p. 56).

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