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Removing the Checks and Balances That Hamper Democracy: Play and the Counter-hegemonic Contradictions of *Grand Theft Auto IV*

MARC OUELLETTE

> The American Dream's a fairy tale. It was never meant to be taken literally.
>
> —Bobby Jefferson, Secretary of Security Enforcement in Liberty City (*Grand Theft Auto IV*, Rockstar North 2008)

Grand Theft Auto IV (Rockstar North 2008) continues the franchise's seeming secondary function of providing an ongoing critique of U.S. foreign and domestic habits and policies. Indeed, with its collection of readily recognizable repurposed icons, *Grand Theft Auto IV* (GTA IV) elevates its satirical attack on the "post-9/11" sensibilities of the U.S. to roughly equal status with the actual game play. However, in its critique of the contradictory nature of these sensibilities, the game's satire is equally contradictory. Thus, while the game is fun and frequently funny, the point of the textual play is often overwhelmed by a reliance on reinscribed icons and reversions to ribaldry. The effect is heightened, and made more unsettling, by the game's setting in Liberty City, a fictional gameworld version of New York City which was introduced in *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design 2001). Everything seems subject to some sort of satire, most notably in the multiple levels of play at work in the game's take on Lady Liberty, the Statue of Happiness. The game's monument is simultaneously a site of poignant symbolism and a simple penis joke. *GTA IV*'s plot and characterizations are similarly dichotomous. Although largely a repetitive revenge-driven romp through the world of organized crime, the game is darker and not as cartoon-like as prior entries in the series. This stems largely from the portrayal of the protagonist as trying to escape life in a war-savaged Balkan nation only to find the same sorts of nastiness in the purported promised land. The seeming social consciousness of the game accounts for a significant proportion of the praise and the criticism heaped on the game both within and outside the gaming community, especially from writers with potentially sensitive constituencies in the New York Area. For example, Seth Schiesel of the *New York Times* (2008) proclaims that *GTA IV* is a "violent, intelligent, profane, endearing, obnoxious, sly, richly textured and thoroughly compelling work of cultural satire disguised as fun." Indeed, Schiesel both summarizes and supplements the positive responses to the game. Yet, others are not so sure. Chris Baker's (2008) review in *Slate* neatly bookends Schiesel's observations and the range between the two. He quite contrastingly notes that a "few chuckles" are to be had from the game's versions of Starbucks and Ikea while simultaneously finding the apparent self-reflexivity of the game to be unsettling. In an almost predictable fashion, Logan Hill of *New York* magazine (2008) dismisses the very same set of references because "thirty titty jokes and visits to the Café Tw@t (get it: twat. Ha!) later, [and serious] comparisons seem downright bizarre." For Hill,

the game remains removed—in poignancy, plot, and platform—from a place of serious work.

Still, they are all correct and it is difficult to disagree with any of them.[1] Every aspect appears in abundance. In fact, for anybody not still struggling with a variant of male pubescence, the ridiculous number of juvenile sex and scat jokes overwhelms any credible attempt at dramatic relief from the admittedly dark and surprisingly self-aware narrative. Indeed, accounting for the multiple simultaneous and valid readings—which seem to match Stuart Hall's (2001, p. 171-173) now standard set of "preferred," "negotiated," and "oppositional"—becomes a necessary exercise. The challenging part is that the apparent authorial intent of the game itself seems to offer an oppositional reading of contemporary America's dominant culture. Therefore, in considering the force and depth of that opposition, one must differentiate between what players are able to do and what players are compelled to do in the game. While this consideration must include an analysis of the textual play, it also maps onto Bernard Perron's (2003) distinction between gaming and playing and his corollary, game playing. The player, in Perron's (2003, p. 241) terms, "knows that the rules of a given game (or even of play, as we'll see) will limit his moves. But he accepts those by playing." In this way, one could conclude that subversion and rule breaking are the rules of the *GTA* world. Even so, the process is more complicated. In fact, Perron cites the *GTA* series as exemplifying the particular demands which led to the corollary finding. As early as *GTA III*, Perron finds that a particular kind of gamer is required to play the game: one who is willing to grapple with its intertextual dimensions. Since *GTA* (in all of its incarnations) not only encourages rule breaking but offers the potential to divert from and even ignore the narrative, Perron (2003, p.252) differentiates between "player" and "gamer" on the basis that for players it is not "a question of playing the game but of playing freely *with* the game." In other words, the game's structure facilitates negotiations with, departures from, and idiosyncratic variations of the preferred reading of the text. Rather than subscribing to the subversive surface, the player's "free will" is the determining factor. Unfortunately, the text and its meaning remain up for grabs.

Ultimately, the audience gets a relentless repudiation of the American dream and its inherent contradictory ideologies, including (and especially) the cult of the individual, progress, opportunity, and freedom. In this last regard, the game offers a peculiarly British sense of irony and deadpan delivery reminiscent of *Top Gear* presenter Jeremy Clarkson's frequent references to what he perceives as the total and nearly complete loss of freedom one sees in the U.S. Put succinctly, Clarkson, like a *GTA* character, notoriously greeted an American visitor to the BBC's *Top Gear* (2008) set with, "American? You can't be. You're nowhere near fat enough to be an American." In a comment echoing the sentiments of *GTA IV*, Clarkson added, "Welcome to the free world, you'll like it here" (*Top Gear* 2008). In addition to the massive worldwide popularity of Clarkson and of *Top Gear*, the comparison holds on several levels, which will become relevant throughout the remainder of this article. First, Clarkson receives frequent criticism for his juvenile, even laddish, attitudes and commentaries, which frequently include borderline sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic comments. However, these are often dismissed as mere jokes with no intention other than humor or as ironic jokes aimed at those who are actual bigots and at the politically correct who have no sense of humor. This take on things seems to allow Clarkson to say fairly horrible things under the guise of claiming to mean them another way, as

he did when claiming that Muslim women wear red g-strings and stockings under their burkas (Leach 2010). These are traits he clearly shares with *GTA*'s equally British bosses. Second, *GTA* and *Top Gear* have an unhealthy element of the "petrolhead," one which demands a slightly licentious libertarian streak.[2] Third, Niko Bellic—the protagonist of *GTA* IV—as well as his family and many of his closest friends, are recent immigrants, meaning that theirs is an outsider's perspective on the U.S. This is not necessarily a privileged viewpoint, but their pursuit of the American dream does afford the occasional insight. *GTA IV* begins with Niko saying, "Life is complicated; I killed people, smuggled people, sold people. Perhaps here, things will be different" (Rockstar North 2008). While Niko continually compares his new life to the hardships of being a soldier in his war-torn Eastern European homeland—particularly in poignant retorts to his new friend Dwayne Forge's incessant whining about the challenges of becoming a crack dealing gang leader in Liberty City's ghetto—he, like others, usually finds himself halted by America's frequent foreclosures of freedom. This is the game's most important irony and the crux of its satire. In America, things are not so different. What is not so clear is whether the game reaches its potential as a critique, or stops short at mere laddish fun.

Regardless, reconciling the readings requires parsing the levels of supposed satire Schiesel (among others) cites to determine the extent to which Rockstar's repetitive rudeboy ramblings constitute commendable cultural critique. My misgiving is that the ironic detachment of laddish humor produces a situation such that the work of humor—as a form of play rooted in the potentially powerful set of rhetorical techniques that starts with bricolage and includes such constituents and complements as détournement, satire, pastiche, and parody—has become subordinated, if not lost, and not just on or by the humorless. Indeed, I am saddened by the lasting effects of a culture of ironic detachment that clings to the reductiveness of defending the offensive with nothing more than the polarized pair of retorts, "I didn't mean it like that" and "It doesn't mean anything, it's just funny." The former admits an awareness of meanings but implies that anyone attributing a particular meaning is humorless because humor itself is harmless. The second begins with humor as harmless because humor is the only recognized reading. Even though bricolage comprises the bulk (if not all) of *GTA IV*'s discursive aesthetic, these pat and in-built responses wander quite a bit afield of Claude Lévi-Strauss' (1966, p.21) original definition of bricolage, in which "it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means [so that] the signified is changed into the signifying, and vice-versa." Said another way, bricolage involves what Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (2002, p.48) term the "processes by which elements are appropriated from the dominant culture, and their meaning transformed, for example through ironic juxtapositions, to challenge and [to] subvert that culture." In this case, the sign's signified is its signifier so that humor is not subversive, it just is. This is the stock-and-trade of *GTA* games, and thus the defense defuses the dissent. Complicating this project, though, are the multiple layers at which the texts operate as well as the game's own in-house "intertextual web," a feature Marsha Kinder (1992, p.29-30) first noted in games nearly twenty years ago. *GTA IV*'s interior intertexts include previous offerings of the game, the games within the game, the newspaper, radio, television and Internet content within the game, cultural objects and sites within the game, and the games' public reputation.

Synchronicities of Textual and Game Play

Combining the other kinds of (textual) play with the play of the game presents an opportunity to see if there are bridges between the battle-scarred borders of the ludologists and the narratologists. One of the battle's most poignant, if almost willfully reductive, shots remains Espen Aarseth's (2004, p.48) flat assertion that "games are not intertextual [because] games are self-contained." In fact, I see my approach as having more in common with Aarseth than with the narratology of, say, Janet Murray or Henry Jenkins (especially given the paucity of palpable politics in his writing) because it really hinges on a semiotic basis. Aarseth (2004, p.48) explains, "Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) game play (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld). Of these three, the semiotic is the most coincidental to the game." At the very least, the game constitutes its own sign system. Therefore, signs inhere in that context. While it would be a mistake to suggest that *GTA* games do not have intertextual relationships with each other, Aarseth's approach has a particular usefulness in considering an issue like cheating. It could be argued that there can be no cheating in a *GTA* game because cheating *is* the game. This relationship applies to the textual play, as well. Taken this way, the game is cynical; to be satirical requires something more. To be sure, just as there are boundaries to the gameworld, there are limits to any critical approach. For example, Aarseth (2004, p.50) concludes that when combining narrative and the rule set, there remains a sharp distinction between them so that the "underlying form (narrative structure or game rules) remains untranslatable [from story to game and vice-versa] but the cultural conventions, such as the setting and character...are translated." This position does not anticipate a game whose translated cultural conventions—which certainly sounds like the start of any reasonable definition of intertext—also constitute elements of the gameworld and of game play. This is precisely what happens in every installment of *GTA* since *GTA III*, and it requires an extension or addendum to Aarseth's thought, rather than a departure. This is especially important when considering the ambivalence of the textual play within *GTA IV*, and whether or not that ambivalence is experienced or produced when playing the game.

When, for instance, the site of the textual play occurs as an Easter Egg (a hidden feature or means to an end), it confirms Aarseth's (2004, p.51) assertion that the "gameworld is its own reward." But if the gameworld is a bricolage (or pastiche, parody, and so forth) then, as Daniel Chandler (2002, p.224) points out, it is precisely the "intertextual authorial practice of adopting and adapting signs from other texts." That said, if an intertext is not translated, it is not because it cannot mix with the game play. Perhaps most pointedly, the player experiences this process when attempting to traverse Liberty City. As with earlier *GTA* games, there is a substantial gameworld consisting of several islands. However, not every space is immediately available to the player. Rather, access to additional territories must be earned by completing a specified number of missions. In several of the games, there are cover stories designed to blend the narrative with the game play. For example, in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar North 2002) the bridges are closed due to hurricanes. In *GTA IV*, the war on terror provides the rationalization for the closure of transportation networks. There are constant reminders that everything is closed—subway, bridges, tunnels, air traffic—due to the (very clearly imagined) terrorist threat that grips the city and the rules of the "Jingoism Act," the game's mockery of the U.S.

Patriot Act. The player is told on the radio and on the Internet that maintaining democracy requires punishing everyone equally so that the terrorists will not win. Indeed, Rockstar has combined narrative logic with in-game rewards (or vice-versa). Any such loss in translation occurs as a result of a larger cultural tendency to ignore the work of (all forms of) play and especially humor. As Christine Harold (2009, p.9) explains, when developing and theorizing the potential of bricolage, and especially of détournement, the Situationists foresaw the limitations of practices which rely "not only on an existing form for its critique, but also on people's familiarity with it." No matter how clever or funny the play, something of the original sign is preserved along with any ideologies conveyed by that sign, for these form the basis of the intertext.

In following closely the variety of kernels, hubs, and satellites (to borrow from television studies) within *GTA IV*, the cultural commentary appears on at least four levels: inescapable, discretionary, intentional, and idiosyncratic/serendipitous. Admittedly, the player's degree of choice in the encounter serves as the distinguishing factor. Here, it is worth noting that Gonzalo Frasca (2003, p.232) enumerates four "different ideological levels in simulations that can be manipulated in order to convey ideology [sic]. The first level is the one simulation shares with narrative and deals with representation and events. This includes the characteristics of objects and characters, backgrounds, setting and cut scenes." Frasca then turns to the actual play within a game when developing the final three categories. The "manipulation rules" and the "goal rules" distinguish between what a player is able to do and what a player must do in the course of the game" (ibid.). A fourth level, that of "meta-rules" refers to the ways in which rules can be changed" (ibid.). Taken together, Frasca's categories provide a rough guide to the player's encounters with *GTA IV*'s various kinds of play within its scope as a game. Clearly, then, there are areas of overlap between Frasca's levels and the ones to be discussed further. Moreover, Frasca's levels offer insight into the potential effects of the textual play and vice versa. The categories indicate the most frequently occurring methods of critique, the depth of the critique, and where, when, and how the players encounter and even engage in that critique. Most importantly, examining the cultural commentary in and through the levels reveals the dimension of the game's own undercutting of its subversive potential through its story and play devices.

Playing the Levels and Levels of Play

Foremost of the sites of overlap is *GTA IV*'s story itself, which offers a (daemonic) parody of the American dream. The most common encounters are of the inescapable variety. Furthermore, a large cohort can be observed while the player is driving to or from one of the myriad missions. They are randomly and liberally strewn throughout the gameworld and the narrative arc so that every activity will include some kind of an example. The names of the game's many buildings, vehicles, and of course the name of the gameworld, Liberty City, constitute signs the player cannot avoid. These are frequently in the form of détournements, where a détournement, usually a visual piece, is a rearrangement—literally "turning around"—of a previous work in a satiric or parodic fashion to expose the underlying ideologies and remove the doublespeak that usually obscures the self-interest of those deploying the discourse (Sandlin and Milam, 2008, p.339). Simple examples in *GTA* games include puns on popular

American brands or companies, many deriving from Cockney rhyming slang. For example, the roster of vehicles includes the Landstalker and the Patriot, which mock but also question the effects of SUVs and Hummers, as well as the people who drive them. Then again, a motor-scooter based on the Vespa or Piaggio models is called Faggio in a clear attempt to question the masculinity of its drivers. The name of the fried chicken chain, Cluckin' Bell, rhymes with "fuckin' hell." RS Haul manages to rhyme on "arsehole" and to mimic U Haul simultaneously. There are also nano360 and Bittersweet mobile phones which refer to the iPod/XBox 360 and the Blackberry, respectively. Nike is the target of Prolaps, while The Gash clearly refers to a particular khaki uniform maker. The Honkers restaurant chain and the television show, *America's Next Top Hooker,* comment on a particular predilection. Panoramic pokes fun at Panasonic, as GetaLife does at MetLife. The Degenatron gaming system mocks players and parents.

Another inescapable source of commentary in *GTA IV* occurs during the conversations between and among Niko and the other characters with whom he develops friendships. For example, stolen car dealer Brucie Kibbutz's latent homosexuality, rendered transparent and metonymic by his typically American compensatory masculinity, provides a recurring, if repetitive figure. More compelling are Niko's conversations with Katie McReary and the previously mentioned Dwayne Forge. Dwayne and Katie both tend toward the solipsism of self-pity until Niko tells them about seeing his entire village slaughtered and other horrors. Here, as in many of the lists cited above, the criticism seems to be aimed at Americans as much as at America. While these occur within the main story arc—which accounts for roughly two-thirds of the game's missions—in the course of the game the player may decide that it is worthwhile to attempt side missions, help friends, answer the payphone, and go on dates. There is, however, something of a Machiavellian nature to the friendships which undercuts their subversive potential. The player is encouraged to develop these friendships since they can lead to money and other rewards, including fast cars, helicopters, weapons, safe houses, and more job opportunities. For example, being Brucie's friend means receiving frequent helicopter and boat rides, which provide the basis for the first encounters with the Statue of Happiness. The Statue, in turn, serves as a key site in one of the final missions, and offers a key Easter Egg for players.

In terms of the job opportunities especially, the game again becomes its own reward and thus the subversive effect is diminished. Pushing the plot along becomes more important than the other aspects. Although many of the developments hinge on the player's choices, the conversations which accompany those choices are ultimately inescapable. As well, choosing one friend over another presents a moral dimension not previously seen in *GTA* games. However, this also leads to prizes and to the greater rewards of moving the game along and highlighting the player's skills and achievements. For example, Niko must decide whether to kill Francis McReary or his brother Derrick. Killing Derrick allows Niko to use Francis' guilt as future leverage. However, if Dwayne is killed instead of his rival, PlayboyX, the latter turns on Niko for being so ruthless in yet another comment on the player as much as the culture. Most notably, Niko can choose to befriend and to defend his fellow countryman Florian (a.k.a. Bernie) when the latter is beset by gay bashers upon his arrival in Liberty City. As much as it could be argued that *GTA IV* makes players at least play out the idea of aiding and befriending a homosexual, at the end of the last of his missions, Bernie

rewards Niko with the fastest car in the game. The car allows the player to win street races and to outrun police during getaways, both of which help tremendously in completing the game.

Perhaps the most thorough and pointed example of inescapable elements of potential critique is the previously mentioned Jingoism Act, which references the U.S. Patriot Act. Predictably, the Jingoism Act has little to do with freedom and much to do with restriction. It also calls attention to the cause-effect reversal of the Patriot Act. That is to say, the Jingoism Act does not prevent acts of terrorism so much as create and categorize them. By its very definition, there is always already a terror threat. However, the largest part of the joke is that the supposed acts of terrorism are usually the result of the protagonist's actions. As much as the frequent misattributions of terrorist activity poke fun at the Act, they serve some key in-game functions. The radio, Internet, and newspaper bulletins which document the crimes serve as rewards for player progress and skill. They also provide hints for future missions and tell the player which crossings or other transportation modes are open or closed. References to terrorism and to the Jingoism Act become signposts for successfully completed missions. As well, the target of the satire (if there ultimately is one) is not so much the U.S. law as it is authority in Liberty City and authority in general. This changes the cultural critique from being aimed at a specific location to being scattered and diffuse. Moreover, it offers nothing new since attacks on generalized authority figures, especially absentee parents, have been the staple of teen-driven culture industries since the 1950s.

The second, discretionary, level coincides with a more purely ludic approach. Indeed, Marku Eskelinen's (2001, p.37) version of video game play reduces it to nothing more than a series of macro-economic strategies based on a cost-benefit analysis and opportunity cost model.[3] The benefits of performing the extra missions include cars, weapons, money (to buy cars and weapons), friends, friends with benefits, friends with henchmen, and a greater experience—that is, practice—of the gameworld (which is handy in terms of offering threat preparation and rehearsal in the event of returning to the same ground in the course of another mission or running away from the police). A seminal example can be found in the Florian/Bernie missions. Niko bases his defense of Bernie on the premise that Bernie should be able to be anything he wants to be in America. In fact, *GTA IV* hits the gay equity button fairly hard, with the aforementioned Brucie as well as with the newspaper articles and radio soundbites about a scandal ridden politician who was discovered to be secretly gay and left-leaning. Being a left-wing politician is worse, but not by much. The irony of the little satires is that Bernie and the others do not have access to freedom or to the pursuit of happiness. Instead, they are free to be targets of discrimination, especially by earlier groups of immigrants who were themselves fleeing persecution or were the targets of discrimination. This also provides another opportunity for the game to mock its own players, as *GTA* gamers are notoriously homophobic. The overwhelming majority of comments for the most frequently viewed Internet video of the last Bernie mission bear this out, as do its competitors (GTASeriesVideos 2009). Simply put, people are choosing to complete the mission *despite* the cultural implications of the storyline they are enacting. This is not to say that game play renders cultural critique impotent, but rather that the two as laid out in this game tend to work against each other, and the textual play often works against itself.

The optional side missions in *GTA IV* represent an intermediate step between the mandatory kernel missions and the entirely user directed third method in which the game presents cultural critique. Side missions, like the discretionary missions above, also include player choice. The player is often rewarded with additional powers—including greater stamina, injury resistance, and access to vehicles—for completing the side missions. This third category also includes the variety of websites and the aforementioned newspapers the player may browse, radio and television traffic, minigames, and other features the player must consciously and actively seek in order to consume. Admittedly, certain radio newsflashes, which typically attribute Niko's activities to terrorists or report bridge and tunnel status, seem to combine the mandatory and corollary components. Generally, though, radio and television selection is entirely at the user's discretion. Again, the content encompasses several categories of "play." For example, Judge Grady on radio station WKTT offers a satiric parody of courtroom programs. The station, whose call letters stand for "We Know the Truth," and its format would not really seem out of place on actual AM radio. Its television and news companion, Weazel News, is an obvious play on Fox News. The targets within the news, on radio and the web, are multiple, from various sources, and are hit using a variety of methods. For example, a straightforward détournement renders "crapslist" and "Krapea" as ostensibly more accurate renditions of craigslist and Ikea. Krapea, complete with odd spellings of familiar words, is also cited in a Weazel News article describing the rescue of a boy who had been trapped in the store for six years. Indeed, consumerism, especially the disappointing mediocrity of masstige (whereby one wonders if the store's name is Swedish for "parts missing"), is a favorite target. At the same time, though, one finds something different happening in the name of the stock exchange, the "BAWSAQ." This gem roughly puns both NASDAQ and the way a Glaswegian allegedly might enunciate "ball sack."

In these instances, it is not so much the fact that something of the original sign is preserved that renders the textual play ineffective. At the very least, some difficulty arises from the nature of any détournement insofar as it becomes "necessary to keep the alterations simple, so as not to render the original image completely indiscernible" (Harold 2009, p.9). However, in the case of the BAWSAQ, Krapea, crapslist, Tw@t, Faggio, RS Haul, and the dozens of others, Rockstar chose not only a simple alteration, but the most obvious sexual or scatological one. As Harold (2009, p.11) explains, "although negation is an important function of *détournement...*it must not remain mired there, ardently opposing dominant discourse while failing to say anything new." In this case, the game is not so much ardently opposing dominant discourse as it is being simply oppositional. While sex and filth have long served as leveling agents in satire—admittedly, Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift were fond of such references—the question remains as to whether or not *GTA IV* is offering anything new in its array of détournements. Overwhelmingly, then, *GTA IV* remains very much in line with its predecessors in being a big, noisy game with bawdy humor and terrific play, but as cultural commentary its own premises prevent it from being anything more.

A mildly less juvenile representation appears for pop star Kerry McIntosh, who is *GTA IV*'s bricolage of Kate Moss and Britney Spears (among others). Her substance abuse, impaired driving, promiscuity, and frequent tabloid appearances are, according to Weazel News, "propelling her career into the stratosphere." These were topped off by her "highway breakdown," which features paparazzi pictures of the

actress running nude across a highway. At the level of pastiche, this achieves little more than reciting an observation. It is difficult, though, to determine if this achieves the level of parody or remains a pastiche. For Linda Hutcheon (2000, p.37), the key distinction occurs because while "parody is repetition...it is imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways." In addition, Hutcheon (2000, p.38) posits that "parody is transformative in its relationship to other texts; pastiche is [merely] imitative...Pastiche usually has to remain within the same genre as its model, whereas parody allows for adaptation." These make pastiche seem more superficial, and this is where the Kerry McIntosh stories fit. First, the Kerry McIntosh character does nothing at all in terms of the game play. The genre of the model—tacky, tabloid press—is not only the same as the genre of the imitation, the imitation occurs within the context of a video game built around and celebrating the same qualities. As something more developed, the article and its photo poke fun at celebrity and the news media, but also at the viewing and listening audience. This is significant because it either assumes the player will not notice or that the player is self-reflexive. Either way, such a move might serve to undermine the effectiveness or reach of the play.

A similarly broadly based attack occurs during an episode of Judge Grady on WKTT. After sexually harassing women in the courtroom, the judge harangues the female plaintiff in a divorce case for scratching her impishly obnoxious husband's truck: "You scratched his truck? His new accountancy truck? The kind of truck a man who works in an office buys so he can feel like a man again?" Here the words come out in a more satiric fashion since the sarcasm is one which seems to believe its own irony and again seems aimed at the game's audience. This time, the topic is the compensatory masculinity that precipitates the purchase of the truck (White 1997, 116-117). A similar process occurs in the many stories which cover the Jingoism Act. Says Liberty City Deputy Mayor Bryce Dawkins, "These terrorists want to take away our freedoms. But look. We've done it for them. Ha. We win. You lose." The mayor is more succinct: "Let's get to wiretapping and detaining indefinitely." Like the previous examples, the Jingoism Act works because it speaks the truth. Any variation results from the removal of the layers of obfuscating the political doublespeak. Therefore, the limitations which hinder the other examples do not seem to apply.

However, the success—for lack of a better term—of the satire depends on at least two things: a) someone actually reading it, and b) a commensurate amount of self-reflexivity on the part of that reader. This is significant because it highlights one of the intertextual cues Aarseth and Eskelinen (2004) fail to consider when offering their now famous chess analogy. It is also missing in Eskelinen's (2001) rather hollow assertion, "If I throw a ball at you I do not expect you to drop it and wait for it to start telling stories." Certainly, one can play chess without understanding its origins in empire building, but if anyone throws anything at me, I expect to know why and the reason better be a good one. In other words, no matter what kind of figures used in chess, there will always be some kind of relationship between the players themselves. No game of baseball between the Yankees and the Red Sox can occur without the shadow of over 100 years of rivalry, not to mention the individual competitions between players, between managers, and between cities. More importantly, the commentators and the broadcasters would never let it be otherwise. That is precisely the (meta)rule in this kind of game. Thus, any consideration of *GTA*

IV's subversive tendencies must also turn to the aims, intents, but most importantly the activities of the user.

These form the fourth and final mode through which the cultural play takes place, the extra-diegetic and/or "meta-rule" to which Frasca refers above. Simply put, this rule consists of the activities the player decides upon and defines, but which still take place within the gameworld. Mods might be a further location for analysis, but they are inherently idiosyncratic and sometimes nothing more than blatant calls for attention from an audience that probably should be mocked. In any case, theirs is a different negotiation of the production, distribution, and consumption circuit. An obvious place to start or end is the Statue of Happiness. Like many of *GTA IV*'s features, it plays on something iconic and metonymic; in this case, the Statue of Liberty. In this world, Lady Liberty holds a cup of coffee and a rather uninspiring message:

> Send us your brightest, your smartest, your most intelligent,

> Yearning to breathe free and submit to our authority,

> Watch us trick them into wiping rich people's asses,

> While we convince them it's a land of opportunity.

> JULY IV

> MDCCLXXVI

Given such a rewriting of "huddled masses," one which is more true than funny and funny because true, nobody will argue that the statue constitutes an appropriation. Even so, the status of the appropriation seemingly defies classification.

A popular story—with tens of thousands of Google hits—posits that the face of the Statue belongs to Hillary Clinton. Therefore, the coffee refers as much to America's hypocritical beliefs regarding substance and fast food addictions as it does the so-called "Hot Coffee" mod. Of course, the criticism of this mod offered Ms. Clinton an alternative to her more frequent Canadian bashing as her candidate's conservatism of convenience. However, it is the Easter Egg that gives pause: the now-famous indestructible beating heart, a heart in chains and entombed in a cold metal casing that understandably might be mistaken for an iron maiden. The power of this critique fades once the name of the statue is considered, since "happiness" said quickly results in a homophone of "that's a penis." Intriguingly, Brucie calls it the Statue of Freedom during a helicopter ride. This suggests that the name was changed during production. The effect would be quite different and the heart could be read with the rest of the composition. It might then be somewhat easier to characterize the effort as being satirical.

Regardless, as an Easter Egg or as a trip destination, the Statue serves as a reminder that the game can be its own reward, and it probably falls into the third category as corollary contact with cultural critique due to intentional acts. This differs from corollaries such as might occur while outrunning police or gangsters, sniping from construction cranes or scaffolds, or trying to steal airplanes. However, without a

walkthrough, the Easter Egg and a full look at the statue can only be found through old fashioned exploration. Moreover, its paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes require a sensibility outside the text. That sensibility includes the reference to the Hot Coffee mod and Rockstar's somewhat sullied reputation. As mentioned earlier, a key intertext, even in a game of chess with Aarseth's rocks or *Simpsons* pieces, is the players' own shared history. In the case of *GTA IV*, this history, like the game's play and its content obscures the lines between and among the usual methods and approaches towards creating a subversive text.

Conclusions

At some point *GTA IV* stopped being a game that mocks the ignorance of non-gamers (recall *Degenatron* and *eXorbeo*) and absentee parents while slipping in occasional references (pimpshots) to Rockstar Games and to other members of that maker's stable. In *GTA IV*, it seems that at least some of the content in each of the four modes of delivery is about Rockstar itself, including and especially allusions to *Bully*, an important game in terms of its engine/interface, which became the model for *GTA IV* and the vehemence of the outrage it sparked. In *GTA IV*, there is a tinge of bitterness not seen in, say, the "Celebrate with Cake!" ads of *GTA: San Andreas* (Rockstar North 2004). Clearly, responses to previous games provide one of the answers to the question of why someone would design *this* game. Yet it should be recalled that those targets do not play video games. Why, then, would the usual suspects—the disaffected youth of Degenatron ads—take in the game's cultural critique? How would they do so? For some, opportunity is motive. Detailed exploration of the gameworld also yields hints and clues, glitches, Easter Eggs, stunts, 100% completion, and the chance of Internet glory for the accomplishment. This accounts for player encounters with the cultural commentary in all four modes (inescapable, discretionary, intentional, idiosyncratic). The *Grand Theft Wiki* site (2006), for instance, has a section devoted to "*Seinfeld* moments" and other esoteric trivia allegedly found in the game. These depend heavily on the reader's paradigm. That said, any grouping must surely include those who never watched *Seinfeld*—and who would not project that show onto any game—but who must be predisposed to seek out and enjoy condemnations of the "war on terror." This, however, still begs the question of the extent of any subversiveness or the reach of the play. Quite simply, I remain skeptical of the reach of any textual play in this game and would go so far as to question its actual politics. In too many ways, *GTA IV* just is. It only means that it means. In other words, the work of humor—and therefore some of the important work of all of the kinds of play in the game—is not being recognized, or worse, is undercutting itself and therefore is not happening.

In many cases, the seeming simplicity of the practice obscures the subtlety of its aims. As McKenzie Wark (2005, p.146) advises, "The trick is to turn the possibility of copying into an act that restores agency to the act of appropriation, rather than merely adding to the stock of worthless copies that surround us. The key to détournement is not to appropriate the image, but to appropriate the power of appropriation itself." Here it is worth adding that the *GTA* version of Ferrari, the Grotti, takes its name from "grotty," a decidedly British way of saying grotesque and unpleasant. The user-developed resource, *Grand Theft Wiki*, has a list of parodies

and references devoted to the puns, détournements, and other plays on brand names and icons. While fairly complete, puns such as Grotti are notably absent from the inventory. This suggests that at least some of the play is lost on the primarily American audience. When considering this aspect of the game's (or games', since all of them since *GTA III* play parts in the process) commentary, one must include the players as being targets as well as being the audience. This is not surprising given the tenuous reach of such textual play. Jennifer Sandlin and Jennifer Milam (2008, p.342), for example, note that détournement in particular "is not without contradictions and potential problems." Foremost among these is the status of the sign being adapted. This aspect "essentially makes the medium of mainstream commercial culture voice counterhegemonic messages" (Sandlin and Milam 2008, p.346). Any type of play that relies on imitation and on intertext necessarily defers to the original sign.

It also relies upon the recipients' relationship to that sign. Harold (2009) puts it more pointedly. In terms of cultural play like bricolage and especially détournement, Harold (2009, p.11) explains that the "inevitable, if unintended result...[is] a simultaneous *conservation* of the original sign and its ideologies." Very often, the most seemingly oppositional aspects of the rearrangement are not the most effective because the simple reversal or negation of the original sign is too reliant upon it and leaves too much of it intact. As well, with so many references to itself and its host of in-jokes, Rockstar and its conservation of the originals and their ideologies are hardly unintended. In some very real ways, then, *GTA IV* becomes something of a self-parody. *GTA IV* has not changed the message, it merely relocates it. In their critique of text play as a form of cultural resistance, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter (2004, p.79) distinguish between deviance and dissent. The former is "like civil disobedience," while the latter "occurs when people disobey the rules for self-interested reasons" (Heath and Potter 2004, p.79-80). Admittedly, the two can be difficult to distinguish. However, Heath and Potter (2004, p.80) offer the example of the rise of masculine boorishness as a response to feminism's critique of patriarchy as an illustration of a difference that they argue has been elided by the popularity and premise of the "counterculture critique." While feminism is a case of dissent, boorishness stoops to the level of mere deviance. At is best, *GTA IV* offers up deviance and dissent simultaneously and sometimes tries to blend the two. Nowhere is this duality better reflected than in the Statue of Happiness, which cannot make up its mind if wants to be a penis joke, a self-referential redress of an earlier perceived slight deriving from another sexual joke of questionable taste, or a piece of serious cultural critique.

In this regard, my opening remarks about Jeremy Clarkson make more sense because there is a strain of particularly British and laddish behavior and humor in all of the *GTA* games. For example, the "S-train hard!" of Prolaps billboards combines a shot at Nike with one at fitness buffs through references to bowel movements and to hemorrhoids. More pleasantly, the names of islands and neighborhoods (such as Alderney) in *GTA IV* are taken from the Channel Islands and other British locales. There is also a newspaper piece on Americans' sense of the "C-word" as the ultimate conversation-ender as opposed to British people's penchant for using it at every opportunity. Herein lies the deciding dilemma. A sizable portion of the humor or fun or commentary is aimed squarely at or deliberately over the player, whether he/she knows it or not. James Davis (2005) finds the same phenomenon in that

quintessential lads object, the men's magazine. Readers "claim to read the magazines because they are funny [but] argue that the magazines have no political significance whatsoever" (Davis 2005, p.1015). In fact, humor is used as a defense *against* political significance. Peter Jackson (2001, p.104) explains the process as having a twofold effect: "irony is used as an ideological defense against external attack ([as in] only the humorless do not get the joke) and an internal defense against more ambivalent feelings." The more ambivalent feelings would arise if the critique of the reader were realized. Additionally, the presence of a politics provides problems for many readers who prefer more escapist motives. In the case of *GTA IV*'s lads humor, the escapism derives not just from the textual play and its humor, but also from the fact that "it's just a game." The game becomes its own rationale and its own outcome in this formulation. This is not entirely incongruent with Aarseth's assertion that a game is its own reward. However, in this way the subversive work of play becomes subsumed by and through the work of play(ing the game). This is precisely what occurs when the *GTA IV* player befriends Bernie or encounters a report of purported terrorist activity and it means acknowledging that the playing of the game can work against its narrative content.

Where I had hoped to finish was with a consideration of Frasca's (2004) still more hopeful thoughts regarding video games as a potential site for exploring Augusto Boal's "theatre of the oppressed." This development of Bertolt Brecht's ideas combines games with theatre to foster critical debate, especially surrounding themes of social justice. Indeed, *GTA IV* might have been a game capable of creating "an environment for debating not just through verbal communication but also through performance" (Frasca 2004, p.228). However, I now find myself wondering if the downgrading of the work of humor and of play is yet another affect or consequence of "governmentality" and of consumerism, two grand cultural imperatives that add self-perpetuation and self-surveillance to the dyad of self-fulfillment and self-justification (Gordon 2001, p.2). This is why Sandlin and Milam (2008, p.346) question the reach of "culture jamming" and ask "when commercial media is pirated for radical messages do these messages become mere entertainment or product?" While it seemingly advocates for governing through freedom, the state founded on governmental rationality also demands that individuals govern themselves accordingly. Even the most allegedly subversive offering of one of the most allegedly subversive game series can be classified as another mass media product. It also recalls Heath and Potter's dictum that cultural rebellion is never against the dominant cultural and economic system but rather fuels that system. Here, it should be remembered that the Situationists' theory and practice of bricolage, détournement, and so forth was aimed squarely at dismantling spectacle, not contributing to it. Chris Hables Gray (2005) writes that these techniques as currently deployed, especially through digital means, are tremendously limited in their potential. Gray finds that there is "little that is proactive, that builds a new society, except for the old situationist commitments to novelty and pleasure. Wonderful as those are, they are not enough" (2005, p.128). *GTA IV* definitely offers some novelty (the scope of the game world, the addition of ethical choices) and a tremendous amount of pleasure (it is a fun game with funny moments). On their own, these are more than enough to make the game successful as a game, but the substance of the novelty and of the fun dampens much of their subversive potential. Thus, I share little of the enthusiasm for détournement (and bricolage by implication) that Wark (2005, p.152) proclaims when suggesting that "[e]very kid with a BitTorrent client is an unconscious Situationist in

the making" because as he allows, "What remains is the task of closing the gap between a critical theory gone astray, still caught up in the model of knowledge as property, and a popular movement that cannot quite develop its own consciousness of its own power." Even in Wark's terms, the qualification overwhelms the celebration. It is precisely the self-interest of the game maker and of the game player that make it so. Said another way, it *is* just a game.

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Notes

[1]   A possible exception for disagreement might be with Hill. It is clear early on that Hill's dismissal of *GTA IV* occurs in substantial part because it is a video game. After studying the game thoroughly, the dismissal is still difficult to dispute entirely. Issue can be taken with its out-of-hand nature, but even this has a basis in knowing the source of the comments and the history of the series. By way of analogy, one might be safe in concluding outright that appropriate funeral attire is not likely to be found in a Frederick's of Hollywood catalog, and confirming this presupposition would not really take much time at all.

[2]   American audiences might be more familiar with the term "gearhead," but there is a slight difference between the American and the British species of car enthusiast. As *Top Gear* would have it, the gearhead almost uniformly pursues power in a might-makes-right approach that is genuinely in keeping with American taste and the emphases of American motoring television and print offerings. The British counterpart stresses style, handling, and comfort, with the occasional foray into value comparisons, if not considerations.

3   Although unacknowledged, this is much closer to Geoffrey R. Loftus and Elizabeth F. Loftus' early, yet insightful *Mind at Play:The Psychology of Video Games*, which offers social/behavioural psychological approach to reward schedules and reinforcement. This is worth noting since many if not most of the ludologists reject out-of-hand and without investigation any notion of gamer psychology. Given the context of this essay, it is with tongue firmly planted in cheek that these readers are reminded that the development of marketing owes a great deal to John B. Watson's methods.