Making Meaning out of Social Harm in Videogames

by

Aidan Fortier

B.A., Dalhousie University, 2014

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the
School of Criminology
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2018

Approval

Name:	**Aidan Fortier**
Degree:	**Master of Arts**
Title:	**Making Meaning out of Social Harm in Videogames**
Examining Committee:	**Chair:** Richard Frank Assistant Professor
	Bryan Kinney Senior Supervisor Associate Professor
	Sheri Fabian Supervisor Senior Lecturer
	Anthony Vickery External Examiner Assistant Teaching Professor Theatre Department University of Victoria
Date Defended/Approved:	September 14th, 2018

Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

or

b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

or has conducted the research

c. as a co-investigator, collaborator, or research assistant in a research project approved in advance.

A copy of the approval letter has been filed with the Theses Office of the University Library at the time of submission of this thesis or project.

The original application for approval and letter of approval are filed with the relevant offices. Inquiries may be directed to those authorities.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

Update Spring 2016

Abstract

A literature review demonstrates that videogame research has theoretical and empirical relevance to criminology. This thesis explores the construction of meaning around representations of social harm in videogames by answering two research questions: 1) How is social harm represented in videogames? 2) How do players construct meaning around videogame content relating to social harm? Study 1 is a qualitative content analysis of representations of social harm in the popular videogame *Skyrim*. Themes included crime and punishment, money and power, extrajudicial crime control, legitimacy of violence, and criminalization of race. These findings are contextualized against analogous real-world cultural constructs. Study 2 consists of 18 interviews with players about their experiences interpreting and responding to social harm representations in videogames. Players' construction of meaning depended on factors including player-character relationship, playstyle, game genre, and play context. Preliminary metrics for measuring these factors are proposed, and implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: videogames; social harm; cultural criminology; media; qualitative research

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the lands on which I have lived and worked for the duration of this thesis are the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səl̓ílwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), Songhees (Lekwungen), Esquimalt, and W̱SÁNEĆ First Nations. I would like to acknowledge my participants, without whose contributions, this thesis would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the members of my supervisory committee, Dr. Bryan Kinney and Dr. Sheri Fabian, for their guidance and support. Finally, I would like to thank my friends, family, and colleagues who have helped motivate me throughout this project. This thesis is the product of the efforts of many, and I am grateful to everyone who helped bring it to fruition.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Acronyms

CJS	Criminal justice system
FPS	First-person shooter
GAAM	General Affective Aggression Model
MMO	Massively multiplayer online (game)
NPC	Non-player character
PRCM	Player-character relationship model
REB	Research Ethics Board
RPG	Roleplaying game
VCVH	Videogames-cause-violence hypothesis
VGV	Videogame violence

Glossary

Bounty	In the context of the videogame *Skyrim*, a bounty is a sum of gold owed by the player character as a consequence of lawbreaking. Each hold tracks bounties separately, so a player character who has committed crimes in one hold will not be prosecuted in another. If the player character speaks to a guard while they have a bounty on their head, the guard will attempt to arrest them. Player characters with extremely high bounties may be attacked by guards on sight.
Companions	One of the factions that the player character can join in *Skyrim*. The Companions are elite mercenaries noted for their martial honour and prowess in direct combat.
Cutscene	A part of a videogame in which the player watches scripted events unfold in a manner similar to a short film, and has little to no control over their character.
Dark Brotherhood	One of the factions that the player character can join in *Skyrim*. The Dark Brotherhood is an illegal order of assassins noted for their use of stealth and subterfuge.
Empire	In the context of the videogame *Skyrim*, the Empire is the dominant political power in most of Tamriel. During the events of *Skyrim*, the Empire is engaged in a civil war against the Stormcloaks over the sovereignty of the province of Skyrim.
Faction	In the context of the videogame *Skyrim*, factions are groups or organizations of non-player characters. The player character may join certain factions in the game, which grants access to various quests and activities.
First-person shooter	A genre of videogame in which the core gameplay mechanic involves shooting enemy characters with guns or other weapons.
Hold	In the context of the videogame *Skyrim*, holds are jurisdictional areas akin to real-world feudal territories. They are governed by Jarls and are largely independent from one another but traditionally swear allegiance to the High King of Skyrim.
Gamer	A person who plays videogames and identifies with the ‘gamer’ label. For some, this label is politically charged and carries certain connotations within videogaming communities. See section 1.1.2. for more detail.
Jarl	The ruler of a hold in Skyrim. Jarls occupy a position similar to feudal lords and can be elected to the position of High King of Skyrim by a committee of other Jarls.

Ludology	The study of videogames as games. A ludological perspective analyzes videogames in terms of their interactive components and the dynamic systems they comprise.
Lycanthropy	The condition of being a werewolf in *Skyrim*. Lycanthropy is a blood-borne infection that causes the victim to periodically transform into a large bipedal wolf-monster. Lycanthropy is criminalized in Skyrim (see section 3.1.1. for more detail).
Massively multiplayer online game	An online game in which thousands of players can log into the same game world and can play simultaneously and interact with each other.
Mediated representation	Images/narratives conveyed through media that serve to construct meaning around a particular phenomenon.
Narratology	The study of videogames as stories. A narratological perspective analyzes videogames in terms of the narratives they convey.
Non-player character	A character within the game world that is not controlled by the player.
Nord	The majority ethnic group in Skyrim. Nords are typically tall, pale-skinned, fair-haired humans who resemble real-world Scandinavians in appearance and accent. They consider Skyrim to be their ancestral homeland, despite having arrived in Skyrim as colonizers from the fictional continent of Atmora.
Open-world	A virtual game world that the player can freely travel and explore, as opposed to a more constrained game world that the player is guided through linearly.
Player	A person who plays videogames, who may or may not identify as a gamer.
Player character	The in-game character controlled by the player.
Player-character relationship	The degree of similarity or difference between the player and their character, and the extent to which the player has control over their character's identity.
Playstyle	The pattern or approach to making decisions about how to interact with the game.
Roleplaying game	A genre of videogame in which the player takes on the role of their character and embarks on adventures or completes objectives as that persona.
Skyrim	When italicized, *Skyrim* refers to a fantasy roleplaying videogame. Skyrim (not italicized) is the name of the fictional province in which the game is set.
Social harm	Interpersonal harm that may or may not be covered by legal definitions of crime.

Stormcloaks	A militia of Nord rebels seeking to establish Skyrim as an independent Nordic ethnostate. During the events of *Skyrim*, the Stormcloaks are engaged in a civil war against the Empire over the sovereignty of the province of Skyrim.
Strategy game	A genre of videogame that engages the player's tactical decision-making skills, modelled after war games such as the board game Risk.
Tamriel	A fictional continent in the *Elder Scrolls* universe. Skyrim is one of the nine fictional provinces in Tamriel.
Thane	An aristocratic title awarded by a Jarl in *Skyrim*. The player character can become a Thane by helping the Jarl and the citizens of their hold. Being a Thane grants the player character the ability to purchase property in the hold, as well as evade some consequences for lawbreaking in that hold (see section 3.1.2. for more detail).
Thieves' Guild	One of the factions that the player character can join in *Skyrim*. The Thieves' Guild is an organized crime syndicate noted for its influence over law enforcement and goal of establishing financial influence over every part of Skyrim.
Vampirism	The condition of being a vampire in *Skyrim*. Vampirism is a blood-borne infection that causes the victim to require feeding on the blood of mortals, and in some cases grants the ability to transform into a winged monster with increased strength, speed, and magical powers. Vampirism is criminalized in Skyrim (see section 3.1.1. for more detail).

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, videogames have been rising in popularity and technological sophistication, raising questions about their potential influence on consumers. Research evidence suggests that videogames can have a variety of positive and negative effects on cognitive, affective, and behavioural variables. Most notable among these is the purported relationship between violent videogames and aggression in real life. However, few studies to date have considered the interplay between specific representations of game content and the player's construction of meaning around that content. This thesis addresses this issue and provides a foundation for filling this gap in the literature. Theoretical perspectives such as cultural criminology, symbolic interactionism, and active audience theory lend themselves to an understanding of videogames in terms of the images and narratives they convey and the meaning that is constructed around those representations. Working from these perspectives, this thesis consists of two studies with the goal of elucidating how social harm is represented in videogames, and how players construct meaning around such representations. A qualitative content analysis of the representation of social harm in the popular videogame *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* reveals themes around which meaning may be constructed, including crime and punishment, money and power, extrajudicial crime control, the legal and social legitimacy of violence, and the criminalization of race. These findings are considered within the context of analogous phenomena in the real world and the culturally constructed meanings surrounding them. Interviews with players revealed the kinds of factors that may shape their construction of meaning around videogame representations of social harm. These factors include the relationship between the player and their in-game character, the way in which the game communicates information about social harm to the player, individual player preferences about how to approach moral decision-making opportunities, and the genre and context of gameplay. These findings have implications for the future of videogame research and highlight areas for further examination.

1.1. Contextualizing Videogames as a Medium

Perhaps one of the first questions that comes to mind regarding this thesis is, why should criminologists care about videogames? At first glance, videogames appear trivial, firmly situated within the realm of leisure and fiction, with little relevance to the realities of crime. In fact, criminologists have concerned themselves with such trivialities since at least the 1990s, through the lens of cultural criminology. According to this perspective, criminality and crime control are culturally constructed, and as such must be interpreted in terms of the meanings they hold (Hayward, 2012). Cultural criminology, grounded in symbolic interactionist theory (Ferrell, 1999), holds that public perceptions and understandings of criminality and crime control are shaped in part through "mediated representations" thereof (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995, p. 12). In other words, the images and narratives conveyed through media such as news, film, television, popular music, and comic books serve to construct meaning around criminality and crime control. Therefore, situating videogames as a media form and a cultural product, we can apply the lens of cultural criminology to examine the cultural context in which videogames are created, how criminality and crime control are represented in videogames, the meanings that players construct around those representations, and the way those constructed meanings may give rise to cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes on an individual, subcultural, and societal level.

1.1.1. Crime, culture, and media

In the first collection of essays on the topic of cultural criminology, Ferrell & Sanders (1995) offer insights on how criminalized subcultures are often organized around cultural products such as art, music, and fashion. They cite examples such as the "collective aesthetics" (p. 5) of street gangs, arguing that the shared style among members is a core component of the in-group identity and the perception of that group by outside observers. As such, Ferrell & Sanders argue that these collective aesthetics must be examined alongside the actual criminal activity of the gang in question for a fuller understanding of the subculture as a whole. "Cultural undertakings" (p. 7) are likewise subject to criminalization, as Ferrell & Sanders illustrate in their discussion of punk and rap music. These counter-culture genres share an inclination for messaging and imagery that flies in the face of hegemonic culture and mainstream ideas of decency

and good taste, prompting authorities to brand them as obscene and suppress them through censorship and prosecution (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995, pp. 8-9). Hayward & Young (2004) note how such subcultures do not independently spring into existence, but are created by their members in the context of a broader culture, influenced by mass media and hegemonic power structures (p. 261). This broader hegemonic culture likewise shapes mainstream understandings of criminality and crime control (Sanders & Lyon, 1995). For example, Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts (1978) examined how British news reporting constructed a cultural understanding of muggings as "a frightening new strain of crime" (p. 3). These mediated representations of muggings prompted judicial and policing crackdowns on the perceived epidemic, and influenced public opinion to call for harsher punishments and greater government urgency, even in spite of the existing crackdowns. The influence of mass media on cultural understandings is demonstrated again in the publicity surrounding drug-related crime in the 1980s, which served in part to justify the Reagan-era 'war on drugs' (Brownstein, 1995; Reinarman & Levine, 1989, 2004). The mediated representation of drugs, especially crack cocaine, as bringing an unprecedented threat of crime and violence served to construct a public perception of drug users and distributors as acceptable targets of more aggressive and punitive law enforcement policies, including mass incarceration and longer mandatory minimum sentences. The use of media campaigns to shape public opinion and justify these kinds of policies did not end with the Reagan administration, of course. In the United States, the media remains the most publicly visible frontier on which the war on drugs is being fought (Eddy, 2006), despite criticism that such campaigns are ineffective at reducing drug use and serve more to amplify fear and skew public perception around the prevalence and danger of drug use (Mallea, 2014). In the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, the 'war on terror' has been similarly justified through western media representations of terrorists, with a particular focus on negative stereotypes of Muslim 'extremists' (Eid & Karim, 2014; Helly, 2004, 2012; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018). Such portrayals have served to inflame Islamophobic tensions and influence public opinion to condone controversial domestic policies touted as counter-terrorism measures, such as Canada's Bill C-51, which has been described as "rightly aimed at violent Islamic jihadi terrorists" (Gunn, 2015).

Mediated representations in fiction can also shape the construction of meaning around criminality and crime control in the real world. For example, popular culture texts

such as comic books (Reyns & Henson, 2010; Williams, 1994) and folk hero legends (Kooistra, 1990) present a variety of hegemonic and subversive constructions of meaning around crime and justice as abstract concepts. In a more concrete example, the stylized representation of criminal investigation in television police dramas has had a considerable impact on public perceptions of forensics, giving rise to an exaggerated view of the resources available to law enforcement and the efficiency of evidence processing (Baskin & Sommers, 2010; Brewer & Ley, 2010; Durnal, 2010). The increasing ubiquity of media in contemporary life brings to the forefront the role of mediated representations in shaping our understanding of reality. As Ferrell, Hayward, & Young (2015) argue, "pervasively popular forms of contemporary communications now constitute the primary gauge by which we assess the value and importance of current events" (p. 151). Moreover, as pop culture media blurs the lines between information and entertainment (e.g., reality television, entertainment media with plots 'ripped from the headlines'), the influence of fiction on cultural constructions of meaning is heavily intertwined with that of fact. The factuality of mediated representations is secondary to their pervasiveness and persuasiveness. This blurring of the edges of reality occurs not only in media representations, but also in some instances of social action. Hayward (2012) identifies virtual spaces, such as online videogaming platforms, as an important site of cultural criminological inquiry, highlighting how virtual harm enacted in these spaces can manifest in ways that cause actual harm. He offers examples such as cyber-theft of virtual goods which have real monetary value, cyber-bullying, and simulated sex with minors in online communities. Positioning videogames as both vessels of mediated representations and social spaces in which virtual actions can have actual consequences, we can begin to see their relevance to criminology.

1.1.2. Videogaming: A growing industry and subculture

Over the past several decades, videogames as a medium have grown exponentially in popularity and sophistication (Goldberg, 2011). The shift away from arcade-based games to home and portable devices has made gaming increasingly accessible to a wider and younger audience, affording greater privacy and a lower barrier to entry into videogaming communities and subcultures. Technological advancements in computer programming have further established videogames as a major sector of the entertainment industry, as opposed to the niche pastime it once was.

In the United States, for example, almost 90% of children and teenagers play videogames (Gentile, 2009), averaging about two hours of play per day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Market analysts estimate the 2018 global videogame market value at $137.9 billion USD, reaching 2.3 billion players worldwide (Wijman, 2018). With numbers on this scale, the potential influence of videogames and the rationale behind research focusing on their effects is evident, given their occupation of such a large space in public consciousness.

As the videogame industry has grown, so too has a videogaming subculture. This subculture was brought to public attention most notably by the GamerGate controversy of 2014. Briefly, GamerGate referred initially to a conspiracy theory concerning the alleged unethical conduct of game developers, critics, press, feminists and other progressives. It has since come to represent a broader movement of resistance to the diversification of representation in videogames and videogaming communities, expressed through the harassment of women and minorities in those communities (Braithwaite, 2016; Todd, 2015). While the population of videogame players is considerably more diverse than the traditional gamer stereotype (young, white, heterosexual, cisgender males) might suggest, many videogame communities remain hostile to marginalized identity groups, and to women in particular (Braithwaite, 2016; Grooten & Kowert, 2015; Salter & Blodgett, 2017). The centering of whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality in gaming communities is reflected in the overrepresentation of these traits in the kind of characters that are available to play in many popular videogames (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Consalvo, 2003; Dietrich, 2013; Everett & Watkins, 2008; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Hitchens, 2011; Janz & Martis, 2003; Leonard, 2005; Mou & Peng, 2008; Shaw, 2009, 2010a, 2012; D. Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). As videogames have evolved into a major element of popular culture, gaming has become a locus of identity, closely tied to geek masculinity, and defined in part by its relation to femininity and hegemonic masculinity (Braithwaite, 2016; Shaw, 2010b). The emergence of videogame communities, aided by advancements in communications technology like social media and text or voice chat within multiplayer videogames, has further solidified the “gamer” identity through the collaborative construction of what it means to be a gamer, and perhaps more importantly, what it does not. If the in-group is young, white, heterosexual, cisgender males, then the out-group consists of people who play videogames but do not match the

other criteria and, not coincidentally, the same types of people who were the targets of GamerGate harassment. In recent years, the evolving videogame industry has started to target a more diverse population, resulting in the de-centering of the traditional "gamer" demographic (Shaw, 2012). The GamerGate movement is then perhaps better viewed as an attempt by those who identify as "'real' gamers" (Braithwaite, 2016, p. 1; Evans & Janish, 2015, p. 127) to defend that identity by enforcing in-group/out-group boundaries and attacking those they perceive as encroaching on their territory of gaming.[1] Given this social context, it should come as little surprise that a videogaming subculture which centres the white, straight, cisgender male might have some overlap with other demographically similar subcultures, both hegemonic and subversive. For example, the U.S. Military, in which the majority of active duty and reserve servicemembers are white and male (United States Department of Defense, 2015), has used videogames as tools for recruitment, training, and clinical treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (Derby, 2014, 2016). White supremacist groups are also reported to have used multiplayer gaming to recruit young, white, male gamers to their cause (Johnson, 2018). Thus, without even truly touching on the content of videogames, we can see how a videogaming subculture, related subcultures, and the behaviours associated with them can be of relevance to criminology.

1.1.3. Analyzing videogames

The increasing popularity of videogames, and the consequent emergence of the field of videogame studies has given rise to questions about how videogames should be studied. Over the past two decades, videogame scholars have discussed the merits of narratology versus ludology in terms of their suitability for videogame analysis (Aarseth, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2012, Eskelinen, 2001, 2004; Juul, 2001; Pearce, 2004; Ryan, 2001). To summarize, the narratological view positions videogames as stories that can be analyzed in terms of the messages or narratives conveyed through their script, similar to more traditional media forms such as film or literary texts. The ludological perspective positions videogames as games, that is, as dynamic systems composed of interactive elements. Players interact with these elements within the framework of the game's rules or structure, and the system produces a reaction to that player input. Ludologists take

[1] Due to the controversy over terminology, I use the term "gamer" only to describe individuals who self-identify as such, while the term "player" refers to anyone who plays videogames.

the position that stories in games are of secondary importance to gameplay, viewing them as “uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy” (Eskelinen, 2001, n.p.). For individual players, the relative importance of story versus gameplay can be highly subjective, but a holistic view of videogames as uniquely interactive media forms requires consideration of both. This false dichotomy has prompted scholars to propose integrative perspectives to better account for both the narrative and ludic elements of games and how they interact (Căşvean, 2015; Ferri, 2007; Frasca, 2003; Konzack, 2002; Malliet, 2007; Simons, 2007; Wesp, 2014). The key feature of videogames that sets them apart from other media forms is that the game’s plot or narrative does not merely unfold as it might in a more traditional storytelling medium, but is driven by player actions and decisions. The fact that videogames require players to interpret and respond to game content positions videogame players as inherently active audiences (Behrenshausen, 2013; Munday & Chandler, 2011). This means that rather than passively consuming mediated representations in videogames, players must actively construct meaning around them in order to make a decision about how to respond to them. The role of the active audience can exist incidentally in other media forms such as film or television, but it is intrinsic to videogames by virtue of their interactive nature. As such, videogames need to be understood not only in terms of the narratives or mediated representations they convey, but also in terms of how players construct meaning around them and respond to them in-game.

1.2. Videogame effects: a review of the literature

Over the past two decades, the rising popularity of videogames has prompted a burst of research on their effects (Prot, Anderson, Gentile, Brown, & Swing, 2014). To better organize research questions in this area, Gentile (2011) lays out five dimensions of videogame effects: the *amount* of play (measured in time), the game’s *content* (themes and player objectives conveyed by the game), the *context* of gameplay (rules and mechanisms that govern the type of gameplay, such as singleplayer, multiplayer, competitive, cooperative), the *structure* of the game (how the game delivers information to the player through the on-screen display), and the *mechanics* of gameplay (how the player manipulates the game controller to produce an effect in the game). For example,

studies that focus on the amount of time spent in gameplay have found negative effects associated with high amounts of videogame play, such as lower school performance (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Chan & Rabinowitz, 2006) and pathological gaming or videogame addiction (Charlton, 2002; Gentile, 2009; Griffiths & Hunt, 1998; Sim, Gentile, Bricolo, Serpelloni, & Gulamoydeen, 2012; Wittek et al., 2016). On the positive side, correlational and experimental studies considering the structural components of games have shown that playing action videogames may improve a variety of visual-spatial skills, including mental rotation, visualization, spatial resolution, visual searching and tracking, and visual-spatial attentional capacities (Feng, Spence, & Pratt, 2007; Green & Bavelier, 2003, 2007; Oei & Patterson, 2015; Okagaki & Frensch, 1994). These improvements transfer to comparable tasks outside of the videogame setting, suggesting that videogames could promote neuroplasticity and may have practical and therapeutic benefits (Achtman, Green, & Bavelier, 2008). Studies considering the context of gameplay, specifically prosocial contexts that are centred on helping other characters, have found a positive relationship between playing prosocial videogames and exhibiting prosocial thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Anderson, Gentile, & Dill, 2012; Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010; Narvaez, Mattan, Macmichael, & Squillace, 2008; Sestir & Bartholow, 2010). Under the dimension of content, researchers have often focused on the relationship between videogames depicting violence and player aggression in real life. This relationship is arguably the question with the most relevance to criminology, and deserves its own section for a detailed description and explanation.

1.2.1. Videogames and violence

One of the most hotly debated questions around videogames is the issue of their relationship to real-world violence and aggression. A favourite talking point of media pundits, this purported relationship was touted as a key factor in the incident now known as the Columbine High School massacre. This mass shooting, which claimed the lives of 15 including the perpetrators (with an additional 24 injured), was committed by two teenage boys; Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. A key issue in this event relevant to our current discussion is how this mass shooting was linked to the fact that the boys were fans of a videogame called *Doom*. *Doom* is a notorious “first-person shooter” game, known for its highly graphic violent scenes. In addition to playing the game extensively, Harris and Klebold were reported to have created custom game levels, one of which

closely resembled the reality of the shooting that would follow a few months later (Pooley, 1999). In the context of the perpetrators' interest in violent videogames, the Columbine massacre sparked a nationwide debate about the role of videogames in influencing aggressive behaviour and delinquency. This tragedy and the ensuing moral panic was a crucial part of the context that would shape future research on videogames, and indeed was a likely catalyst for the pursuit of studies focusing on the relationship between videogames and real-world violence, detailed below. While the technological advances of the videogame industry since Columbine have paved the way for greater diversity in videogame genres, violence remains prominently featured, often as the core gameplay mechanic in most videogames (Statista, 2017). Whether the player is jumping on the heads of cartoon mushrooms and turtles as *Super Mario*, or gunning down enemy combatants in *Call of Duty*, physical conflict is almost invariably a part of the videogame experience.

One of the most extensively researched aspects of videogaming is its relationship to violence. Indeed, this has been the focus of most psychological research on videogames for the past two decades (Anderson et al., 2012). Correlational and experimental studies have found evidence to support a causal link between exposure to videogame violence and cognitive, affective, and behavioural aggression in both the short- and long-term (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bartholow, Sestir, & Davis, 2005; Gabbiadini, Riva, Andrighetto, Volpato, & Bushman, 2013; Konijn, Bijvank, & Bushman, 2007). Several meta-analyses of the literature on this topic suggest that the balance of evidence favours what I call the "videogames cause violence" hypothesis (VCVH) (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson et al., 2010; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014), although these findings are not unchallenged (see section 1.2.2.).

Anderson & Dill (2000), who explicitly contextualize their work in the aftermath of the Columbine massacre, propose a theoretical model for the process by which exposure to videogame violence (VGV) may lead to aggressive behaviour in real life (see Figure 1.1). The General Affective Aggression Model (GAAM) suggests that exposure to violent imagery in videogames can prime the player, increasing short-term aggression via the mechanism illustrated in the diagram below. In the long term, Anderson & Dill (2000) suggest that repeated play and attainment of in-game incentives for completing violence-related game objectives serve to rehearse and reinforce the aggression-related knowledge structures that can lead to a more aggressive personality.

These knowledge structures include aggressive scripts, heightened vigilance for enemies (hostile perception bias), a belief that others will behave aggressively, a belief that violent solutions to problems are effective and appropriate, and a desensitization to graphic violence. According to Anderson & Dill (2000), the development of aggressiveness as an enduring trait through this mechanism results in the application of these knowledge structures to real-life situations rather than just in-game: "aggressive people have social perception schemata that bias the interpretation of observed events in aggression-enhancing ways. They perceive more violence than is really there, and they expect people to solve problems with aggressive means" (Anderson & Dill, 2000, p. 774).

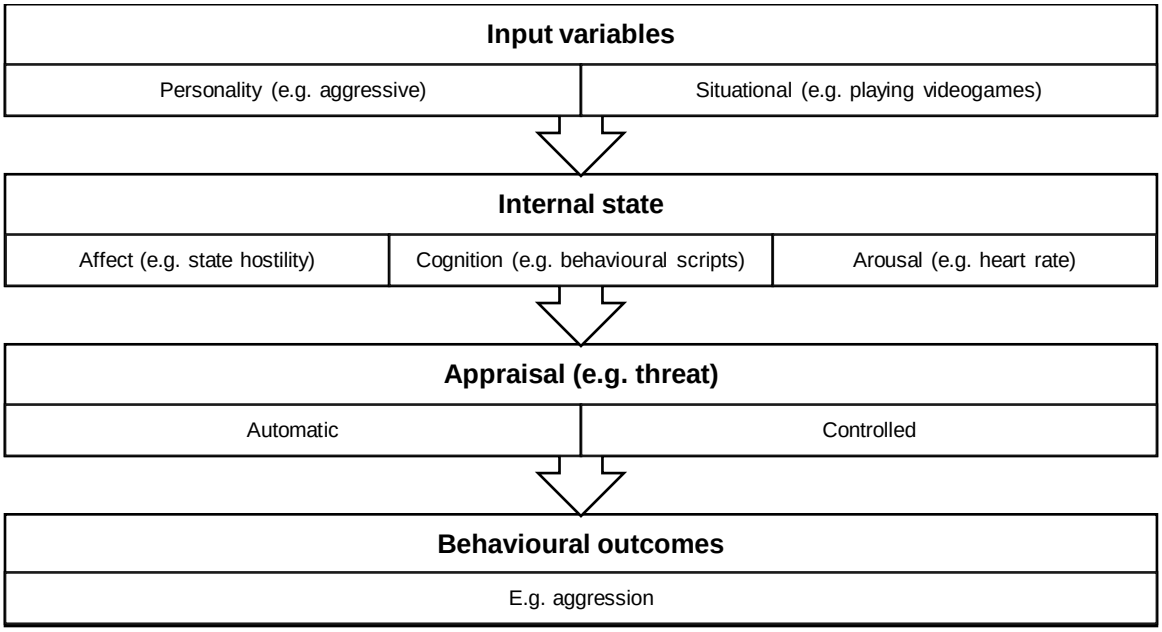


Figure 1.1 Single episode General Affective Aggression Model: Short-term effects of videogame violence.

Note: Adapted from "Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life." By C. Anderson & K. E. Dill, 2000, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78(4), p. 773

Bartholow, Bushman & Sestir (2006) suggest an alternate pathway to VGV-induced aggression, namely that exposure causes desensitization to violent stimuli, which leads to subsequent increases in aggressive behaviour due to a lowering of inhibitions, which would normally prevent such aggression. The implication here is that trait aggressiveness may exist in individuals and is suppressed by various social mechanisms, which are weakened by desensitization to violent stimuli through repeated

exposure. On the other hand, the GAAM suggests that trait aggressiveness can be developed by the rehearsal and reinforcement of aggression-related knowledge structures. While these two models do not contradict each other directly with respect to the broader VCVH, taken together they do raise an important question: does repeated VGV exposure produce trait aggressiveness where it did not previously exist, or does it merely exacerbate the trait in individuals who already possess it? On a related note is the issue of reverse causality: the question of whether a predisposition towards aggression could give rise to a preference for more violent videogames (Funk et al., 2002). The reverse causality hypothesis is complementary to the VCVH, in the sense that an aggressive predisposition can give rise to a preference for violent videogames, which may further increase aggressiveness, although this presents somewhat of a chicken-and-egg problem. This possible reverse causality is of further interest when considering how the effects of VGV may be moderated by other variables associated with aggression, such as gender, mental health, and family environment (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bartholow et al., 2005; Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson, Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2014; Ferguson et al., 2008; Gabbiadini et al., 2013).

1.2.2. Critiques of the videogames-cause-violence hypothesis

One of the most vocal critics of studies supporting the VCVH is psychologist Christopher Ferguson, who has raised doubts about the methodology of previous studies supporting the VCVH, citing poorly standardized and validated measures of aggression, and publication bias in meta-analyses (Ferguson, 2011, 2015a, Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009, 2010). Ferguson's studies reviewing the purported relationship found no significant correlation between videogame violence and aggression, and indicated more significant relationships between violent/aggressive behaviour and other variables including depressive symptoms, trait aggression, family violence, and male gender (Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson et al., 2014, 2008). On a societal level, videogame consumption was found to be negatively correlated with youth violence rates (Ferguson, 2015b). The debate is far from settled, with both proponents and critics of the VCVH continuing to publish opposing evidence and arguments to the present day (Allen & Anderson, 2018; Ferguson, 2018; Hilgard, Engelhardt, & Rouder, 2017; Kepes, Bushman, & Anderson, 2017).

We should exercise caution in interpreting the results from these studies, whether they support or contradict the VCVH. Non-academic communities have an unfortunate tendency to take a tentative conclusion from a single study that supports their preferred narrative, turn it into a headline and run with it (Journalist's Resource, 2014; Revkin, 2011; Wihbey, 2011). Of course, all researchers must be aware of this issue when reporting their findings, but perhaps particularly those who study matters relating to public health and safety. Presenting a simple solution to a complex problem can end up doing considerably more damage than failing to produce a solution at all, as policymakers focus all their efforts on a single aspect of the issue and fail to address others that may have more significant but less straightforward effects. This problem is evident in the sort of media rhetoric surrounding videogames, violence, and youth, as exemplified most notably by the news coverage of the Columbine massacre and other similar events since.

We should also consider what is meant by the term "violence" in the context of the VCVH. Does the hypothesis hold, as some media pundits seem to believe, that videogames could prompt a person to commit atrocities like the Columbine mass shooting? The evidence in support of the VCVH indicates much smaller effect sizes, more on the scale of the GAAM's prediction of responding to interpersonal conflict with physical aggression. Is it meaningful to distinguish between initiative and reactive violence in this way? Furthermore, is it appropriate to assume that the purported effects of videogames might always be negative? Consider, for example, a vulnerable person walking alone at night. In such a scenario, increased hostile perception bias could be advantageous to their safety and self-defence, and even justified depending on the actual risk to that person. On the other hand, acting on hostile perception bias when it is not justified can result in tragedy, such as the pattern of unarmed Black men being unduly perceived as threats by police officers in the United States (Ashford, 2012; Banks, 2014; Bloom, 2014; Derosa, 2014; Kara, 2014; Welch, 2007). These are not questions that can be easily answered here, but they serve to further illustrate the relevance of this topic to the field of criminology.

Another element rarely considered in many VCVH studies is the specific representation of violence, and the player's construction of meaning around it. Whether violence is represented as something to be avoided, a means to an end, a primary game objective, or an optional bonus, may influence the player's interpretation considerably.

This interpretive step in the process between VGV exposure and subsequent real-world behaviour is under-researched, perhaps because many existing studies on videogames are quantitative, aimed at predicting behavioural trends for a population. The interpretation of game content in this way is necessarily qualitative, and as such is difficult to measure for large sample sizes. To address this gap in the literature, I explore the question of how players construct meaning around videogame violence, and social harm[2] more broadly. I approach this question from a qualitative perspective, with the aim of generating meaningful material for future research to expand upon and make more conclusive evidentiary claims.

1.3. Theoretical underpinnings

While explanations based on the GAAM or desensitization-disinhibition model may go some way in elucidating the relationship between VGV exposure and aggressive behaviour, my research takes a more qualitative approach to the interpretive process, and rests on a different set of theoretical underpinnings. Cultural criminology, symbolic interactionism, and social-learning theory are each briefly outlined below. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives lay the foundation for a discussion of social harm and its representation in videogames, and how I structure the interpretive work that follows in this thesis.

1.3.1. Cultural criminology

This thesis is largely grounded in the perspective of cultural criminology, which itself is partially grounded in symbolic interactionist theory (see section 1.3.2. for an explanation of the latter). As discussed above, a central tenet of cultural criminology is that one's understanding of their reality is shaped in part by the media they consume (Ferrell, 1999). Furthermore, some aspects of reality itself, particularly those relating to social order (such as definitions of crime and the institutions in place to control it) are constructed within specific cultural contexts, which are shaped in part by mediated representations of those elements of reality (Hayward & Young, 2004). This being the case, it stands to reason that players may form their understandings of real-world issues

[2] Social harm, simply defined, is any behaviour that results in interpersonal harm, which may or may not be covered by legal definitions of crime. See Section 1.3.5 for a more detailed explanation.

such as crime and justice based on their interpretations of mediated representations of those issues, which can include how they are represented in videogames. Moreover, media producers, including game developers, in turn construct and convey meaning in reference to existing public understandings of such issues. This interplay between media creator, consumer, and culture highlights the recursive relationship between cultural understandings of phenomena, and the representation of those phenomena in videogames and other media. As such, these elements of constructed reality, need to be examined with regard to the meaning ascribed to them, hence the current project of investigating how players construct meaning around game content and that which it represents. Furthermore, the uniquely interactive nature of videogames, more so than other forms of media, positions videogame players as active audiences (Munday & Chandler, 2011). Players not only consume the messages in game content, but are often required by game mechanics to make choices about them in real time. The notion of the recursive relationship discussed above is of particular relevance here, when one considers what in-game choices are made available by game developers, and the consequences of those choices.

1.3.2. Symbolic interactionism

The concept of constructed meaning has its roots in symbolic interactionist theory, which holds that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they have for them" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Blumer (1969) further explains that these meanings are constructed through social interaction with peers, and "handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process" (p. 2). From this perspective, it follows that players will react to videogame content in accordance with the meaning they construct around it. Extrapolating from extant cultural criminological theory and evidence, I submit that the construction of meaning is not restricted to game content, but extends to the real-world norms, values, and phenomena represented by their in-game counterparts. For example, a player's construction of meaning around violence may be, at least in part, informed by their process of interpreting the representation of violence in-game. This construction of meaning through interpretation of game content could also apply to any number of types of social harm, social groupings such as race and gender, institutions of power such as the criminal justice system, and the value labels attached to them (e.g. are they condemned, normalized, justified, glorified?). This process of

meaning-making provides one possible mechanism by which videogame content can have an impact on real-world attitudes and behaviours.

1.3.3. Social learning theory

Returning for a moment to Blumer's second premise – that meaning is constructed collaboratively through social interactions – a case can be made for the relevance of social learning theory to this project. Social learning theory holds that learning occurs through observing and imitating other social actors (Bandura, 1977). The interactive nature of videogames positions non-player characters (NPCs) as quasi-social actors, from whom the player can learn a variety of norms, values, and reasoning. In reality, NPCs act as a sort of proxy for the game developers, whose narrative is delivered to players through the medium of the game in question. However, because the player interacts directly with the NPC, rather than passively observing them as they would in a film or book, there is at least an artificial form of social learning at work. Moreover, as videogames increasingly move to online and multiplayer platforms, enabling the emergence of videogaming communities and subcultures (see section 1.1.2.), collaborative construction of meaning can happen alongside other players in real time. In these settings, players can also learn social scripts that do not relate directly to game content, but that govern cooperative and competitive play (Jakobsson, 2006), which may translate into other social situations involving cooperative or competitive dynamics.

1.3.4. Social harm

Social harm is a term largely used by critical criminologists to refer to interpersonal harms that may or may not fall under any legal definition of crime (Dorling et al., 2008; Hillyard & Tombs, 2008; Muncie, 1999). More precisely, social harms are inter-subjective acts which deprive individuals of their basic human needs: the physical, economic, and psychological requirements for well being (Honneth, 1996; Yar, 2012). While these acts may not necessarily be criminal in nature (due to interjurisdictional disparities for example, or the limitations of legislation more generally), they are still worth studying due to their adverse effects on their targets. Focusing on the legal definition of crime, whose legitimacy is derived from institutions of power, leaves a lot of harm unaccounted for, especially harm that primarily affects those excluded from and

oppressed by said institutions. Similarly, focusing exclusively on physical violence ignores many other forms of harm such as non-violent but socially harmful behaviour (theft, deprivation, negligence), psychological violence, or structural violence (see Galtung, 1969), which while primarily perpetrated by institutions, can be perpetuated by individuals through the reinforcement of the power structures behind those institutions. For these reasons I broaden the scope of my research beyond narrowly defined categories of crime or violence to include these other types of harm. If one accepts the VCVH, it is conceivable that the models offered to explain it could extend to other forms of social harm besides physical violence, either by rehearsing and reinforcing socially harmful knowledge structures (GAAM), or by desensitizing and disinhibiting the player to socially harmful behaviour through repeated exposure to its portrayal.

1.3.5. Guiding principles

With these theoretical underpinnings in mind, I approach my research guided by the following principles:

- The relationship between virtual and actual violence is not purely unidirectional, or as straightforwardly causal as suggested by previous studies or media rhetoric.
- The representation of social harm in videogames and the perceptions and interpretations of those representations by videogame players is an important factor in describing and explaining the relationship between virtual and actual harm, rather than the mere presence of social harm in videogames.
- Videogames, as a uniquely interactive type of fictional media, form part of the culture that both influences and is influenced by cultural constructions of social harm.
- Real-world attitudes about social harm, the representation and interpretation of social harm in videogames, and the relationships between them are worth examining in order to better understand this bidirectional influence of and on cultural understandings and engagement with social harm.

The purpose of stating these principles here is to provide a degree of transparency about my perspective as a researcher and to acknowledge how that perspective may shape my approach to this project and my interpretations of its results.

1.4. Research Goals

Operating from the above principles, my goal in pursuing this project is to answer two research questions: 1) How is social harm represented in videogames? 2) How do players construct meaning around videogame content relating to social harm? I approach these questions using two methodological techniques: a content analysis of industry blockbuster *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, and a series of in-depth interviews with players about their perceptions, interpretations, and reactions to various types of videogame content pertaining to social harm. As previously stated, this research is largely exploratory in nature, and serves primarily as a starting point for future research in this vein, to address a gap in the literature left by studies that focus more on quantitative techniques aimed at testing the VCVH.

Returning to my opening question: why should criminologists care about videogames? The existing literature on the VCVH and other issues like school performance and addiction (insofar as such factors are related to criminality) provides a compelling reason on its own. Beyond that, however, the above discussions of how videogames may give rise to behavioural, cognitive, and social outcomes begin to illustrate other areas of relevance to criminology. The ways in which mediated representations in videogames can normalize and rationalize crime and other forms of social harm is certainly worth exploring further. It is also worth investigating how these constructs both shape and are shaped by public understandings of crime and justice, and the people affected by the institutions relating to them. Finally, as gaming communities continue to evolve, the harmful and sometimes criminal activities associated with them should be of interest to criminologists as well. In this thesis, my goal is to address questions about what sorts of mediated representations of social harm exist in videogames, and how players interpret and respond to those representations. Furthermore, I provide a starting point for future criminological research regarding the construction of meaning around videogame content and how such constructed meanings can give rise to real-world behavioural and attitudinal outcomes.

Chapter 2.

Methods

Much of the existing literature on videogames and violence has been aimed at hypothesis testing, particularly the videogames-cause-violence hypothesis, making quantitative research the most appropriate mode of inquiry. In contrast, my research takes an exploratory approach to examining 1) how social harm is represented in videogames, and 2) how players interpret and respond to such representations. The goal of this project is to better understand the kinds of relationships that exist between videogames and their audiences in terms of the construction of meaning of social harm, and to identify targets for future research not yet covered by the existing literature. A qualitative approach is therefore more suitable for capturing the kind of non-numerical data entailed in these endeavours. Qualitative methods also afford a greater degree of flexibility that lends itself well to exploratory research.

To answer these research questions, I have undertaken a two-part research project. The first part consists of an in-depth case study of one popular videogame, using content analysis to identify and understand the kinds of mediated representations that appear and how they relate to real-world cultural meanings around similar issues. The second study involves interviewing players about their experiences perceiving, interpreting, and responding to videogames and the representations they convey.

2.1. Ethical Considerations

Before I proceed, I must acknowledge the role of bias in my research. As I pursue these research questions in the qualitative tradition, I am conscious of the fact that no research, regardless of methodology, is completely immune to the unconscious biases and unstated assumptions of the researcher (see Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Proponents of the VCVH have been accused of giving in to moral panic (Ferguson, 2010), while critics might be faulted for using questionable methods to produce findings that support their point of view (Anderson et al., 2010). Likewise, I must acknowledge my own potential biases and strive to mitigate their effects. As a person who enjoys videogames, I am naturally inclined to favour a more positive narrative about them. To

avoid the undue influence of this inclination, I remind myself that while I take the position that the media pundit's version of the VCVH may be oversimplified, I should not presume to argue that it is entirely wrong. As such, my research is not aimed at refuting this hypothesis, nor do I operate from the premise that it is false. In fact, I resolve not to engage with the VCVH directly, as it is not the focus of my research, nor is it something I can answer with my methodology. Rather, my goal is to approach the question of how the process of constructing meaning from game content might underpin the formation of knowledge structures, beliefs, and scripts, which might include the GAAM and desensitization-disinhibition model, but not necessarily exclusively.

To account for the effects of my perspective and the potential bias it carries, I made a point of consciously acknowledging that perspective as I worked. From the earliest stages of this project, I began keeping a research journal, in which I documented the thoughts and feelings I experienced during each step of the research process, from its inception to the final stages of writing this thesis. Writing and re-reading my research journal gave me the opportunity to reflect on my perspective and how it shaped my understanding of each stage of the research process and helped me identify areas to review with a more open mind.

2.1.1. Approaching content analysis ethically

Recognizing the myth of objectivity does not grant me *carte-blanche* to make whatever claims I please without concern for credibility, however. As I approach the case study of *Skyrim*, I am conscious of my dual role, as both researcher and player. As a player, my familiarity with *Skyrim*'s content and gameplay is a major asset, in the sense that I can quickly and easily navigate the data to identify content that is relevant to my research question. Left unchecked, however, this familiarity could lead me to overstate the importance of themes that resonate particularly strongly with me, while ignoring other themes that are present in the game but that I personally find less engaging, thus damaging the credibility of my findings. This potential pitfall makes my role as researcher all the more important. My knowledge and training as a researcher have equipped me with the necessary tools to produce findings that are credible and not unduly influenced by my views as a player. As discussed in more detail in section 2.2.3, I used inductive analysis to observe themes as they emerged from the data, rather than relying exclusively on a deductive analysis of the themes I already anticipated finding

based on my knowledge of the game. Documenting this process in my research journal allowed me to reflect on my observations and how my perspective shaped them, thereby avoiding subconsciously prioritizing evidence that fit with my predictions at the expense of other themes I had not anticipated.

These efforts to account for the influence of my perspective do not amount to objectivity, however. While I have made every effort to take the game's content at face value, inevitably, my own experiences and beliefs will have shaped my interpretation of the data to some degree. What I may have dismissed as inconsequential and therefore not worth reporting, another observer might hold up as a defining feature of Skyrim's culture. Where I have tried to draw comparisons between in-game content and real-world phenomena, someone else may see an entirely different analogy, or none at all. That being said, one of the core premises of this project is that there is a bidirectional relationship between real-world culture and the fiction produced and consumed by its inhabitants. As a denizen of that culture, I am influenced by the attitudes held and disseminated just as much as any other individual, even if that influence affects us each in different ways. I am no more or less representative of *Skyrim*'s audience than the next consumer, and as such am no more or less qualified to say that my interpretation of its content is the correct one. Therefore, the findings of this case study should not be viewed as an objective and exhaustive account of how social harm is represented in *Skyrim*, but rather as a set of possible constructed meanings about that representation, which may or may not be shared by other players. The academic rigour and reflexivity through which I form these interpretations serve to bolster the credibility of my results and provide transparency in my methods,

2.1.2. Approaching interviews ethically

The present interview study builds on a previous pilot project, which was completed in partial fulfilment of my graduate coursework and was granted course ethics approval for minimal risk research. All five participants in the pilot study consented to have their data used in the final version of this thesis. The current study was approved by the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University (SFU) on July 4th, 2017.[3]

[3] Only participants who aged 19 or older were recruited to maintain a level of minimum risk. While SFU's requirements for minimal risk research are not actually this stringent (see section

The informed consent of participants was a crucial prerequisite to ethical data collection. Upon indicating their interest in the study, participants were sent a document covering the details they would need to make an informed decision to consent (see appendix A). These details included the study's purpose and content, risks and benefits, and the measures in place to ensure participant confidentiality. Each interview was preceded by a review of the informed consent document and an opportunity for participants to ask questions about anything that was not clear to them. Once any questions or concerns were addressed, participants gave their oral consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded. In accordance with Article 10.2 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement, I obtained oral consent to preserve the organic and conversational tone most conducive to building the rapport necessary for an effective interview. Participant confidentiality was ensured through a number of means. All online communications with participants were conducted over a secure network, thus reducing the likelihood of those communications being intercepted. Any identifying details (e.g. name, email address) were redacted from data records, preventing identification in the event of a data breach. All data (e.g. interview recordings, transcripts, research notes and memos) were stored securely on an encrypted hard drive to which only I had access. Following transcription and verification of the transcripts, the audio recording files were deleted so that in the unlikely event of a data breach, voice identification would not be possible.

The same concerns about credibility in the case study are present in the interview study, as the views of participants are filtered through my interpretive lens. Again, my dual role as researcher and player presents both advantages and challenges that must be acknowledged and accounted for. As a fellow player alongside my participants, I had the advantage of being familiar with many of the videogames they referenced and understanding much of the technical videogame jargon they used, which allowed for more streamlined and organic conversations. However, it was important for me not to allow this ease of understanding to manifest as assumptions about what my participants meant when talking about their views and experiences. In the spirit of the active interview (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), my goal was to work collaboratively

---

5.18 of SFU's ethics policy, which considers minors aged 17-18 attending University to be emancipated adults for the purpose of minimal risk study), I set the minimum age requirement at 19 because I anticipated my recruitment post reaching participants from other parts of the world where adulthood might have a different definition than that held by SFU's Research Ethics Board (REB), and who therefore might see themselves as minors even if the REB does not.

with my participants to construct an understanding of their views and experiences. To this end, I employed active listening techniques (see Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) to centre the participants' voices and perspectives. To ensure I was interpreting their meaning accurately, I would at points throughout the interview reiterate what they had previously said, offering them an opportunity to clarify or correct me where I had misunderstood. Having established a sound understanding of each individual participant's meaning, I strove to ensure credibility in my analysis of the data by exercising reflexivity. Again, my research journal proved useful in this regard, but I additionally built opportunities to exercise reflexivity into my study design, as discussed further in section 2.3.3. The tri-phasic approach to data analysis allowed me to reflect on the results of each phase in light of each other, and to consider the role my perspective had played in shaping those results.

2.2. Study 1: A Case Study of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

This case study consists of a qualitative content analysis of the popular videogame *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. The purpose of this case study is to demonstrate how meaning may be constructed around mediated representations of social harm in videogames, and to examine those constructed meanings in the context of analogous phenomena in the real world and how meaning might be constructed around them.

For the uninitiated, *Skyrim* is a popular fantasy role-playing game (RPG), originally released in 2011 for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 videogame consoles and Microsoft Windows computers. The story is set in the eponymous province of Skyrim in the fictional continent of Tamriel, which is inhabited by many fictional species and peoples, called races. The dominant racial group in Skyrim is the Nord race: tall, pale-skinned, fair-haired humans who resemble real-world Scandinavians in appearance and accent, and who consider Skyrim to be their ancestral homeland, despite having arrived in Skyrim as colonizers from the continent of Atmora. Skyrim is divided into nine counties, called holds, which are governed by lords, known as Jarls. Each hold is largely self-governing, but has historically sworn allegiance to the High King of Skyrim (an appointed position held by a Jarl chosen by a council of the nine Jarls of Skyrim), and to the Empire, which encompasses most of Tamriel. At the time the game's story is

set, Skyrim is in the middle of a civil war between the Empire and the Stormcloaks, a group of Nord rebels seeking independence for Skyrim.

2.2.1. Why *Skyrim*?

The success and influence of Bethesda Softworks' *Skyrim* cannot be overstated. According to director and executive producer Todd Howard, it had sold over 30 million copies in the five years since its release (Suellentrop, 2016), and its sustained popularity prompted the developer to release a re-mastered version of the game in 2016 (Bethesda Softworks, 2016), demonstrating its continuing relevance today. It has won over 200 Game of the Year Awards (Bethesda Softworks, 2016), and has had a considerable impact on game development and popular culture more broadly ever since (Famularo, 2016; Kane, 2017), making it an ideal target of analysis for examining the kinds of messages conveyed by videogames and how audiences respond to those messages.

One of the major reasons for its popularity and influence is its 'sandbox' or open-world concept; the freedom to explore and interact with the in-game universe in whatever way the player desires, in contrast with more linear videogames that guide the player along a predetermined storyline.[4] *Skyrim*'s precursors in the open-world fantasy RPG style, both literal (*The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind,* 2002; *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, 2006) and spiritual (*Fable,* 2004, *Dragon Age: Origins*, 2009) set the stage for this blockbuster's success. This videogame genre has its origins the tabletop roleplaying game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax, 1978; Gygax & Arneson, 1974), which popularized the kind of fantasy themes and moral concepts[5] that would become hallmarks of the genre. These games laid the conceptual groundwork and cultivated a dedicated fanbase of the genre to propel S*kyrim* to the "genre-defining" status it holds today (Gerome, 2014). This freedom highlights two more reasons for choosing *Skyrim* as the subject of this case study. Firstly, the player's experience of this game is dictated by the choices they make in how to play it, which may in turn be shaped by the player's

[4] Another key factor in *Skyrim*'s popularity is the built-in compatibility with third-party add-ons or 'mods', which can add to or alter the game's original content (Bethesda Softworks, 2016). This mod support gives players even more freedom to tailor their game experience to fit their individual preferences.

[5] The moral alignment system in *Dungeons & Dragons* consists of a 3x3 chart, with lawful, neutral, and chaotic alignments on the horizontal axis, and good, neutral, and evil alignments on the vertical axis. See Table 2.1 below.

real-world ideas and attitudes. Secondly, because the player is not forced along a single path, the messages conveyed by the game about social harm are mutable, depending on the player's decisions. These two points serve to illustrate the potential of the recursive relationship between videogame content and real-world constructed meanings about these themes. *Skyrim* is not unique in manifesting this relationship, however. Because of the inherently interactive nature of videogames, there is almost always an element of choice in the extent to which the player will engage with in-game representations. *Skyrim*'s advantage as a study subject is that it packs hundreds of hours of gameplay into just one game. It provides a rich and diverse in-game world, a complex society, and a variety of representations of social harm, all packaged within a single unit of analysis.

2.2.2. Data sources

To maximize the efficiency of data collection, I used several methods to gather data. My familiarity with *Skyrim* and its gaming community proved invaluable in this regard. Having several hundred game save files of my own stored from various past playthroughs, I was able to revisit different points in the game and document various events based on the in-game decisions made. Another important data collection tool was *TES5Edit*, a piece of software developed by a team of *Skyrim* players and independent programmers for the purpose of extracting and modifying game files to create third-party add-ons for the game (ElminsterAU, Hlp, Zilav, & Sharlikran, 2012). Using this software, I extracted game files, including non-player character (NPC) dialogue files and quest text files, which expedited the process of transcribing verbal game content. I also referred to the Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages (Various Authors, n.d.), a community-created database of information and media pertaining to in-game content and lore (fictional history of the Elder Scrolls universe). This database allowed me to quickly locate information on how certain in-game content could be accessed and identify points at which player decisions would affect the content available later on in that playthrough. In addition, I obtained some data from various playthroughs of the game that had been uploaded to YouTube by other players (Gopher, 2013; SideWaysThinker, 2013). These sources were especially useful for observing the outcomes of alternate approaches to gameplay that I had not previously considered, thereby revealing instances of game content of which I was unaware.

2.2.3. Data analysis

When I started this project, my scope was limited to the representation of crime in *Skyrim*. While this alone would have afforded me a wealth of data to work with, it also overlooked a great deal of game content that is not explicitly covered by the game's definition of crime but is still relevant to the broader theme of crime and the factors that contribute to it. I therefore decided to widen my scope to account for social harm more generally to present a more holistic view of how these themes are represented. It soon became clear, however, that an exhaustive analysis of every piece of game content related to these themes would be unduly time-consuming due to the sheer amount of available data. I therefore used elements of deductive analysis (see Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 249) to create a framework for making the data more manageable and identifying which data would be relevant to my research goals. I began by using the game's ready-made categories such as factions, quests, and scripted events to organize the data. I then created a list of criteria to identify which categories were relevant to the question of how social harm is represented. If the category included content that met at least one of the following criteria, I included it in my analysis:

- Representation of crime, law, and justice
- Representation of violence and the contexts in which it occurs
- Representation of social/non-violent conflict and the contexts in which it occurs

Using these categories and criteria, I now had a framework with enough structure to organize the data effectively, and enough flexibility to allow for more in-depth analysis of specific themes.

The next step was to use a "spiral model" of inductive analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 235) to identify themes as they emerged from instances of game content that met the criteria outlined above. As these themes emerged from the data, I created codes based on the specific kind of representation being conveyed in those instances. From there, I sought additional data that fit with each code, first within the same category as the original instance, then across other categories, modifying my codes as necessary to fit with the data. For example, violence was one of the most immediately obvious themes to emerge. Under the 'violence' code, I recorded data including varying modes

of combat, the legality of violence in different contexts, NPC dialogue about violence, and quests involving violence. From here, more specific themes emerged such as hegemonic and subversive cultural attitudes towards violence, and the role of the state in determining the legal and social legitimacy of violence. By analyzing the data within and across these themes, I was able to not only construct meaning around independent representations of violence, but to contextualize them alongside other representations and themes present in the game.

2.3. Study 2: Interviewing Videogame Players

Recalling that videogames must be understood not only in terms of their content, but also in terms of the meaning players construct around that content (see section 1.1.3.), Study 2 seeks to examine the latter. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, participants shared their experiences and insights on the process of constructing meaning around mediated representations of social harm in videogames.

2.3.1. Participants

A total of 18 participants were recruited for this project. Five came from a small convenience sample of friends and relatives who were interviewed for the pilot project that formed the foundation of this study. At the time of the pilot project, the participants consented to have their data used in the final version of this thesis. A further three participants recruited under the main study also came from a convenience sample of friends and acquaintances, while the remaining ten participants were self-selected respondents to a recruitment post that was distributed on a number of videogame-focused web forums (see appendix B). The total sample, while small by quantitative standards, is appropriate for the qualitative nature of this study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 45). Rather than seeking to make generalizations based on large data sets, my research focuses on generating rich, thick descriptions of specific instances of the phenomena I am studying, which can then serve as a starting point for future research on this topic. In other words, I am exploring what kinds of questions are worth asking, so that future research might later generate robust answers to those questions.

2.3.2. Interviews

Given the kind of rich, thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences sought by this study, semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate method to gather these kinds of data. The qualitative nature of interviews and the flexibility afforded by a semi-structured interview schedule (see appendix C) allowed for an in-depth and organic conversation with participants about their individual interpretations, motivations, and experiences regarding videogame content and the way they interact with it.

In-person interviews were held at a location of the participant's choosing, to maximise their comfort and safety. Because several participants lived abroad, some of the interviews were conducted over Skype, using a secure network to minimize the risk of a data breach. Six participants (three pairs) were couples and requested to have their interviews conducted jointly, and gave their informed consent after being notified of the impact of that choice on confidentiality. Although I had only planned for individual interviews in my original study design, I found that the flexibility of allowing joint interviews offered a number of benefits, both in terms of the interview process and the data collected. By allowing participants to decide how to frame the conversation, rather than forcing them to conform to a predetermined interview format, I prioritized their needs and preferences, which enabled me to more effectively build rapport with them. Furthermore, I found that the joint interviews offered a more dynamic conversation, where the participants could feed off of each others' comments and provide differing perspectives and counterpoints in real time. Because the dynamicity of joint interviews increased the chances of participants being talked over or having their comments misconstrued, I made extra efforts in these cases to ensure that I held space in the conversation for each participant to voice their thoughts and clarify their meanings.

The interviews began with an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves and offer any demographic information they deemed relevant and felt comfortable sharing. I chose this approach rather than asking for responses to a list of demographic bullet points, following in the tradition of the active interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), to allow participants to identify and position themselves on their own terms. The purpose of gathering demographic data was to note how in individual cases, personal identities may shape one's attitudes and lived experiences, which may in turn influence their interpretations of and responses to videogame content. Participants were also

asked to briefly outline their preferences regarding videogames in general so that subsequent questions could be adapted to match the kind of games with which the participants had the most experience.

The next section of the interview schedule focused on character identity; the process of creating a character, the relationship between player and character, and how character identity might manifest in or influence gameplay. Because many, if not most videogames require the player to actively participate as a character in the game's story, rather than being a passive audience to it, the role of player character is an important object of inquiry. In the words of Kujanpää, Manninen, and Vallius (2007),

> Since the avatar is the proxy for most of the actions the player performs in the virtual world, without it the player is nothing … The game character became a tool for player's actions. The role- playing, fighting, micro-management and all the other actions were channelled through game character. (p. 328)

Next, participants were asked about how they construct meaning or form understandings out of videogame content. Understanding the way players perceive and interpret the content presented to them is a crucial prerequisite to understanding how and why they respond to it. These responses manifest most clearly when players are presented with an opportunity to make a decision about how to react to a given situation within a game. As such, the final section of the interview centered on decision-making opportunities in videogames, with a particular focus on opportunities to decide on a course of action that could result in social harm. I used the term 'moral' decisions here, because 'morality' is a common feature in videogames that many players would be familiar with, rather than disrupting the flow of conversation with a technical definition of social harm.[6] Indeed, many participants explicitly referenced the *Dungeons & Dragons* moral alignment system (Gygax, 1978), demonstrating their understanding of the concept of social harm, if not by name. This system, illustrated in Table 2.1, separates morality along two axes: lawfulness/chaos and good/evil. The concept of social harm (interpersonal harm that may or may not be a crime) is clearly represented in the continuum of evil between lawfulness and chaos.

[6] Several participants asked for a definition of social harm when responding to the recruitment post, which referenced the term. The definition given was "interpersonal harm which may or may not fall under legal definitions of crime."

Table 2.1 ***Dungeons & Dragons*** **moral alignment chart.**

Lawful good	Neutral good	Chaotic good
Lawful neutral	True neutral	Chaotic neutral
Lawful evil	Neutral evil	Chaotic evil

Note: Adapted from *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook* by Gary Gygax, 1978

All 18 participants consented to have their interviews recorded, which was done using a digital USB recording device. I then transcribed each interview using VLC Media Player and Microsoft Word to ensure that the participants' own words were accurately preserved during data analysis, although placeholders (e.g., "umm, uhh") were omitted to maintain efficiency and flow. I also took detailed notes immediately after each interview, making efforts to capture the participants' own words as accurately as possible, to have a written record of the major discussion points as well as the audio recording of the full interview. One audio file was corrupted, so I relied on these notes to preserve as much data as possible in that case.

2.3.3. Data analysis

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, and to avoid limiting my view of the data to my own preconceived notions of what I might find, I wanted to approach the data with an open and flexible perspective. To this end, I took a tri-phasic approach to analyzing the data. During phase one, I organized the data into codes that corresponded to the interview sections, such as the importance of character identity and the factors that influence how players approach moral decision-making opportunities. I chose to use deductive analysis first so that I could address my ideas about what I thought I would find, and then set them aside during the inductive stage of analysis. After taking some time away from the data to clear my thoughts, I approached it again with an open mind in phase two. I created new coding categories to capture the themes and patterns I observed as they emerged from the data. For example, if multiple participants shared a particular perspective, or had varying perspectives on a specific topic, I created a code for that perspective/topic and organized related data under that code, modifying the coding categories as necessary to fit the emergent themes. Once the initial inductive analysis was complete, I used a spiral model of analysis to review the data in the codes from the deductive and inductive phases, comparing data within and across these codes and observing more specific themes as they emerged. This tri-phasic approach to data analysis meant that opportunities to exercise reflexivity were

built into my research design. At the end of each phase of analysis, I took time to reflect on my findings in light of each other. Keeping a research journal of the thoughts and feelings I experienced in response to my findings was critical in this regard, as it helped me uncover sources of unconscious bias and recalibrate my interpretation of the findings accordingly.

2.4. Towards an Integrative View of Videogames

The false dichotomy of ludology versus narratology (see section 1.1.3.) highlights the need for an integrative approach to studying videogames – one that considers both ludic and narrative elements, and how they interact. Study 1 focuses on the narratives conveyed by a game and considers how meaning may be constructed around them in the context of the real world. Study 2, by focusing on the player, aims to elucidate the influence of ludic elements on the construction of meaning around narratives. The purpose of presenting these two studies in one thesis is to illustrate the merits of each perspective and to demonstrate how consideration of both leads to a more holistic understanding of videogames and the people who play them.

Chapter 3.

Results

Having established my research goals and rationale in Chapter 1, and my methodological approaches to meeting those goals in Chapter 2, I now turn to the outcome of my pursuit of those goals. In this chapter, I present my findings in response to the research questions: 1) How is social harm represented in videogames? 2) How do players construct meaning around videogame content relating to social harm?

3.1. Study 1: *Skyrim* Case Study

This case study identifies and analyzes a variety of themes present in *Skyrim*'s mediated representations of social harm. These themes include crime and punishment, money and power, extrajudicial crime control, legal and social positions on violence, and the criminalization of ethnic minorities. The themes are illustrated through examples of game content and considered in the context of the meanings that may be constructed around them and how those constructed meanings may transfer to analogous phenomena in the real world.

3.1.1. Jurisprudence in Skyrim

The criminal justice system in Skyrim covers a variety of offences, each with specific penalties that generally take the form of fines, known as bounties. If the player character is unable or unwilling to pay their bounty, they can serve a prison term proportional to their bounty. If the player character is witnessed committing a crime, the guards of that hold will attempt to arrest the player character and confiscate any stolen items. An arrest forces the player into a dialogue menu, which prevents them from moving or using their weapons or abilities until the menu is exited. The dialogue opens with the following line from the guards:

> You have committed crimes against Skyrim and her people. What have you to say in your defense? (Guard)

This message suggests that, much like many in the real world, the criminal justice system in Skyrim views criminal behaviours as offences committed against the state and society as a whole, rather than against the individuals they directly affect. This message is reinforced by the fact that legal consequences for crime in Skyrim are administered by the hold guards, and take the form of fines or incarceration, rather than any form of restorative justice that involves and addresses the needs of the victims (see Zehr, 2005). In this instance then, we can see a mediated representation of justice as defined and administered by the state, which complements hegemonic, state-based cultural constructions of justice in the real world.

In contrast with many real-world criminal justice systems, however, Skyrim does not have any form of a court system. Guards serve not only as a sort of police force, but also take on the role of judge, jury, and in some cases, executioner, which is most clearly demonstrated in the opening cutscene[7] of the game. In this scene, the player character, along with a horse thief and a group of Stormcloak[8] rebels, is set to be summarily executed by the Imperial Legion, before the execution is interrupted by a dragon attack, allowing the player character to escape and begin the game in earnest. The player character's crime is not mentioned, but seems that they are merely guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time:

> You were trying to cross the border, right? Walked right into that Imperial ambush, same as us, and that thief over there. (Ralof, Stormcloak soldier)

The player character's innocence is again implied by an exchange between an Imperial soldier and his captain as they review the list of prisoners:

> Captain, what should we do? [He/she]'s not on the list. (Hadvar, Imperial soldier)

> Forget the list. [He/she] goes to the block. (Imperial Captain)

While this may be a particularly blatant example, the concept of due process is nowhere to be found in Skyrim's criminal justice system. In the absence of any commentary from the game developers about why they decided not to include any kind of court

[7] A cutscene is a part of a videogame in which the player watches scripted events unfold and has little to no control over their character.

[8] The Stormcloaks are the separatist faction in Skyrim's civil war with the Empire. See section 2.2 for further details.

proceedings in the game, one can only speculate about the rationale behind this decision. One plausible explanation, which draws on the design principle "form follows function" (Vârtosu, 2014 as cited in Căşvean, 2015, p. 38) is that the game developers were unable to design a court system that provided a functional and engaging gameplay experience and therefore decided to omit courts from Skyrim's criminal justice system. Regardless of the reason, the upshot of this decision is that the concept of due process is not accounted for in *Skyrim*'s mediated representation of justice, and its absence is never questioned or challenged by other narratives in the game. Due process and the right to a fair trial are crucial elements of most modern criminal justice systems in the real world. The fact that these elements are uncritically omitted from *Skyrim*'s representation of justice has concerning implications for how players might construct meaning around their real-world counterparts. A construction of justice that favours crime prevention at the expense of due process marks a step in the direction of a more authoritarian and undemocratic society.

While the principle of due process is all but ignored in Skyrim's criminal justice system, the principles of parity and proportionality in sentencing are clearly illustrated and largely reflect the construction and application of those principles in real-world justice systems. As seen in Table 3.1, each offence is associated with a specific penalty that remains the same regardless of the circumstances of the crime. Petty crimes that do not directly harm victims are associated with lesser penalties, while the consequences for major offences like murder are much more severe. Just as in the real world, however, there are some exceptions, in which the relationship between the severity of the crime and the punishment is less intuitive. These exceptions are illustrative of the kinds of values that Skyrim's criminal justice system is designed to uphold. For example, forging a business ledger, which harms a business rather than an individual, results in a higher bounty than assault, indicating the relative value of businesses versus individuals. Prioritizing the interests of businesses over those of individuals is a hallmark of neoliberal, late-capitalist societies in the real world. These priorities are reflected in *Skyrim*'s representation of financial crime versus violent crime, which makes sense when we recall that *Skyrim* was created in the context of a capitalist society. The meanings that players construct around these representations and analogous constructions in the real world may likewise be informed by their socio-economic status and class consciousness under capitalism.

Table 3.1 Criminal offences and legal consequences

Offence	Consequence
Lockpicking	5 gold bounty
Trespassing	5 gold bounty
Killing domestic animals	5 gold bounty
Pickpocketing	25 gold bounty
Horse theft	50 gold bounty per time the horse is mounted
Robbery	Bounty equivalent to half of stolen item's value
Assault (including cannibalistic/vampiric feeding)	40 gold bounty
Breaking out of prison	100 gold bounty
Forging a business ledger	100 gold bounty
Murder	1000 gold bounty and guards attack on sight
Transforming into a werewolf or Vampire Lord[9]	1000 gold bounty and guards attack on sight

Another example of non-proportional sentencing in Skyrim's criminal justice system can be seen in its treatment of vampires and werewolves. For vampire player characters, feeding on a civilian's blood is considered a form of assault, resulting in a bounty of 40 gold. Consuming the corpse of a civilian while in werewolf form is likewise considered equivalent to assault and results in a 40 gold bounty, whether or not the death of the corpse in question was the result of the werewolf's actions. In contrast, transforming from the default humanoid state into a werewolf or a Vampire Lord (a kind of superpowered vampire with a visibly monstrous form) results in the maximum bounty of 1000 gold, regardless of whether the player character attacks anyone while in that form. In effect, werewolves and vampires in Skyrim are subject to a kind of racial profiling, which assumes that by mere virtue of existing in a visibly vampiric or lycanthropic form, they present an inherent threat to society on a level comparable to homicide. The way that players construct meaning around this kind of fictional racial profiling may interact with their constructions of meaning around the way that black and brown bodies in the real world are prejudicially criminalized and unduly perceived as inherently threatening (see Novak & Chamlin, 2012; Welch, 2007, 2016). Alternatively, given that vampirism and lycanthropy in *Skyrim* are transmitted by blood-borne infection, we can also consider how players might construct meaning around this issue in the context of serophobia and the criminalization of HIV+ status in the real world (see Hoppe, 2017).

[9] During the course of the game, the player character may encounter opportunities to become infected by lycanthropy or vampirism, turning them into a werewolf or vampire and granting them certain abilities specific to that form.

If a player character fails or refuses to pay their bounty, they can serve a prison term, the duration of which is proportional to the value of their bounty. Each increment of 100 bounty gold equates to one in-game day,[10] capped at a maximum of seven days, most likely to prevent excessive tedious waiting which detracts from engaging gameplay, rather than for any reason to do with the jurisprudence of maximum sentences. The fact that any offender can simply pay a fine to clear their name, assuming they can afford it, raises questions about the purposes of sentencing in Skyrim. Given that even grievously violent crimes can be cleared with a simple payment, it is unlikely that incapacitation is a primary goal of carceral sentences, although this might have more to do with the tedium of waiting for game time to pass, as mentioned above. As the player character progresses through the game, they gain skill experience, which is lost during a period of incarceration, which contradicts the goal of rehabilitation pursued by many real-world criminal justice systems. It is not clear what happens to the gold from a bounty once it is paid, but the lack of transparency in this regard casts doubt on the idea that such sanctions are intended to provide reparations to victims or to instill a sense of accountability in offenders. This doubt grows when coupled with the absence of any kind of community service or restorative justice option. The effectiveness of these penalties as deterrents is also questionable, as the fine for a wealthy offender is the same as that for a poor one, but the impact is significantly different. Indeed, the rate at which the player character accrues wealth over the course of the game is such that even the maximum penalty for a single offence soon becomes almost meaningless. The true deterrent for many players is the fact that submitting to arrest results in the confiscation of any stolen items the player character has in their inventory, which may or may not include rare and valuable items. However, the severity of this consequence entirely depends on what stolen items (if any) the player character has in their possession at the time of arrest, making the power of this deterrent situational at best. For example, a character who engages exclusively in petty theft will experience this consequence much more harshly than a wealthy murderer who never steals. Whether intentional on the part of the game developers or not, the role of wealth in reducing the impact of criminal penalties in *Skyrim* is a stark reflection of the differential treatment of rich and poor offenders in many real-world criminal justice systems (see Reiman & Leighton, 2013).

[10] The timescale in *Skyrim* is such that one game-day is equivalent to about 72 minutes of real time, although this can be accelerated to roughly one game-hour per real-life second if the player character is sleeping

At a certain level of wealth, the fines imposed for a criminal offence are no longer punitive, but are simply the price of admission to any given illegal activity. A construction of justice that does not consider the financial circumstances of the accused will inevitably come up short in effectively punishing wealthy offenders in real or fictional worlds.

3.1.2. The golden rule: whoever has the gold makes the rules

The role of wealth in the criminal justice system is not limited to cases in which the accused accept the consequences of their lawbreaking. Player characters begin with the ability to resist arrest by fleeing or fighting their way out of the guards' custody, and unlock a variety of other ways to evade punishment over the course of the game. For example, player characters that spend time and resources 'leveling up' or improving certain skills to a high enough level can try to persuade (via a Speech skill check) a single guard to ignore their bounty and let them go. This kind of resolution does not clear the bounty itself, meaning that the player character can still be arrested by other guards. Still another 'escape' from justice is available to members of the Thieves' Guild[11] (an organized crime syndicate discussed further below) who can bribe guards to ignore their bounty, much like the Speech-based persuasion option. Alternatively, Thieves' Guild members can also bribe guards to clear the bounty incurred from the crime for which they are being arrested, although any pre-existing bounty remains in place. The amount of gold required for a bribe is usually higher than the player character's bounty, but allows them to keep any stolen items – a critical aspect for many players. Finally, a player character who has become a Thane (an aristocratic position within a hold, attained by completing quests that help the Jarl and his or her people) can announce their Thaneship to the guard arresting them, clearing a bounty of up to 3000 gold, once per hold. Taken together, these methods for avoiding the consequences of lawbreaking begin to illuminate the relationship between wealth, power, and political influence in Skyrim. The Speech skill required for a persuasion attempt is most closely associated with trading and bartering with merchants, enabling the player character to generate huge amounts of gold by selling the treasures they acquire during their

[11] During the course of the game, the player character can join various organizations, called factions, such as the Thieves' Guild, the Companions, and the Dark Brotherhood (discussed below). Faction membership grants the player characters access to quests and NPC interactions reflecting the mission and values of that faction, so the specific organization a player character joins will shape the kinds of mediated representations to which the player is exposed.

adventures. Thanes, in addition to being considered members of the aristocracy, are granted the right to purchase property in their hold, which presupposes the possession of considerable wealth, given that the prices of available properties in Skyrim range from 5000 to 25000 gold. Bribery, in addition to obviously requiring money, necessitates membership in the Thieves' Guild, whose primary business is wealth, according to Brynjolf, a senior member of the Guild. *Skryim*'s representations of how wealth and political power can be leveraged to manipulate the criminal justice system and evade prosecution reflect the way real-world authorities in the real world often fail to hold moneyed or political elites to account for their misdeeds (see Pontell, Black, & Geis, 2014; Reiman & Leighton, 2013; Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, 2015).

Criminal player characters are not the only ones who can use their wealth to manipulate the criminal justice system to their advantage. While most prisons in Skyrim allow the player character to serve their time simply by sleeping in their cell, convicts in the Reach hold are required to do hard labour in Cidhna Mine, a silver mine owned by one of the wealthiest families in Skyrim, the Silver-Bloods.

> It's an old family. Very well-respected throughout the Reach. The Silver-Bloods run nearly all the lands in this hold, as well as the local inn. And of course, they own Cidhna Mine, the finest prison and source of silver in Skyrim. (Rhiada, a servant of the Silver-Blood family)

The family's wealth and status affords them significant political influence and immunity from prosecution, as seen in the following exchange between Jarl Igmund of the Reach and his advisors:

> Raerek: Igmund, we need to talk about the Silver-Blood family.
>
> Igmund: What about them? They seem loyal enough.
>
> Raerek: Loyal? Thongvor supports Ulfric and his Stormcloaks! We should imprison the entire family as a precaution.
>
> Faleen: I second that, Igmund. Who knows what that family will do for power? They could be working with the Forsworn, for all we know.
>
> Igmund: Enough! We can't imprison the very people that own the jail we would be throwing them into. The Silver-Blood family are to be left alone, am I clear?

The legal status of slavery is unclear in Skyrim, but given that it has been outlawed in other provinces in Tamriel and does not appear anywhere else in the game, it is probable that the practice is at least frowned upon. And yet, the legality or social acceptability of slavery does not seem to matter to the Silver-Blood family, who rely on prison labour to mine the silver that has made them as wealthy as they are. This arrangement closely mirrors the prison-industrial complex of the United States, which has been criticized as a continuation of the tradition of slavery that contributed to the country's massive wealth today (see Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008).

The Black-Briar family in the city of Riften offers another perspective on the relationships between wealth, crime, and power in Skyrim. Maven Black-Briar, whose public face is as the owner of a major mead brewery, heads the family. However, through talking to various Riften residents it soon becomes clear that the mead business is only a part of Maven's enterprise.

> Lady Maven could buy or sell anyone in Skyrim. I wouldn't be surprised if she's the one pulling the strings around this city. She's always welcome in Mistveil Keep and between you and me, I'm pretty sure she even has some pretty influential friends within the Empire. I'd also warn you not to cross her. She employs quite a few... troubleshooters to take care of messy problems. (Indaryn, Black-Briar Meadery brewmaster)

Through membership in the Thieves' Guild, the player character can become one of Maven's "troubleshooters," handling tasks like taking revenge on a business partner of Maven's who backed out of a deal, or sabotaging a competing mead brewery and setting it up for a hostile takeover by the Black-Briars. In return, Maven uses her political influence to facilitate the Thieves' Guild's activities and keeps law enforcement authorities out of their way. These endeavours and the relationship between the Black-Briar family and the Thieves' Guild could be interpreted as a reflection of the kinds of organized white-collar crime that exist in the real world, from mafias to Wall Street (see Walker, 2000).

3.1.3. The long arm of the law has extra fingers

The fact that the existence of the Thieves' Guild is tolerated in Skyrim is not only a result of Maven Black-Briar's influence, but also due to their role as a crime regulation body:

> Years ago, the Guild used to have a foothold in every major city in Skyrim. You wouldn't dare even lift an apple without checkin' with us. (Delvin Mallory, senior member of the Thieves' Guild)

As the player character works their way up the ranks of the Guild, they complete various missions to help restore the Guild's power and influence. For example, one of the major missions the player character can take on involves the elimination of a rival criminal organization to ensure that the Guild retains control over all organized and otherwise significant property crime in Skyrim. From the Guild's point of view, the purpose of this degree of control is to maximise Guild profits, although an important side-effect of this monopoly is the maintenance of a predictable and sustainable crime rate, making the job of law enforcement easier.

> We may guard Whiterun, but the Thieves Guild guards us. If you know what I mean. (Whiterun Guard)

In line with the goal of maximising profits, the Guild does not allow killing while on the job, because killing is "bad for business" (Brynjolf), in the sense that it draws unwanted attention to the Guild's activities and reduces the number of potential targets for theft, as the Thieves' Guild do not generally steal from the dead. This no-kill policy again demonstrates how the interests of an organized crime syndicate can align with those of legal authorities, albeit for different reasons.

For a less clandestine example of how the state sanctions extra-judicial crime control in Skyrim, we can look to the Companions:

> An outsider, eh? Never heard of the Companions? An order of warriors. We are brothers and sisters in honor. And we show up to solve problems if the coin is good enough. (Aela the Huntress, Companion)

Essentially a group of mercenaries, the Companions take on contracts from Jarls and citizens all across Skyrim. These contracts can take the form of eliminating threats such as bandits or wild creatures, rescuing kidnapped citizens, retrieving stolen goods, and hunting down criminals who have escaped from prison. A major advantage of the Companions over official law enforcement bodies is that they are not bound by jurisdictional limits. Each hold in Skyrim tracks crime separately, meaning the charges against an offender in one hold are not recognized and cannot be prosecuted in another. In the absence of extradition treaties between the holds, legal authorities rely on the Companions to effectively enforce their laws outside of their own borders. The role of

the Companions as a sort of extra-judicial but state-sanctioned law enforcement body resembles the growing trend of police pluralisation in the real world (Devroe & Terpstra, 2015; Jones, van Steden, & Boutellier, 2009; O'Reilly, 2015). Considering the Companions alongside the Thieves' Guild provides an interesting view of formal and informal social control in Skyrim.

3.1.4. Legitimate use of force

As with private security firms and other policing bodies in the real world, the existence of the Companions raises questions about the legitimate use of force in Skyrim's society. A Hobbesian perspective, which holds that the state should maintain a pure monopoly on violence, would view the Companions as a detriment to that ideal (Hobbes, 1651/1996). Max Weber's view that the state holds a monopoly on the legitimation of violence, though not necessarily on the use of all violence, can better account for the Companions' role as an entity whose license to use violence comes from the state (Weber, 1968). However, the Weberian perspective offers no explanation for the fact that private citizens can also contract the Companions, especially in the absence of evidence that they must receive state approval to do so. The waters are muddied further by the fact that individual citizens in Skyrim can also send "hired thugs," who are not affiliated with the Companions, to track down and kill a player character who has robbed them or murdered one of their relatives, and that any guards witnessing an attack by these thugs will not always intervene, despite the dubious legality of such contracts:

> Here's the sum we agreed upon. I trust that you will make [player character] pay for killing my dear [relative]. Return to me with proof of the deed. If you run afoul of the law, I will pay your bounty. (Note carried by hired thugs, found by looting their bodies after they attack the player character)

This apparent discrepancy is easier to understand when considering the eligible targets of such contracts. Whereas thugs can be hired to go after virtually anyone who has committed a crime, the Companions' contracts only ever target bandits. In *Skyrim*, the word bandit is not merely a descriptor, but a class of NPC defined by their residence in camps away from civilian settlements, and their reliance on pillage and plunder to make their living. The game mechanics are such that actions that would otherwise be crimes, when committed against bandits, will not result in a bounty. The lack of legal

consequences for attacking or stealing from bandits, combined with the fact that Skyrim's primary extra-judicial law enforcement body is regularly tasked with exterminating them, suggests that bandits, by definition, are considered acceptable targets of violence under the law, and receive none of the legal protections afforded to the members of Skyrim's civil society. The kind of ideology that justifies this differential accordance of rights based on proximity to civil society bears considerable resemblance to the classical liberalism of philosophers like John Stuart Mill, who proposed that "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians" (Mill, 1859/2011, p. 19). This ideology has been used to justify the oppression of such "barbarians" in the real world, such as the colonization of India by the British East India Company, of which Mill himself was an administrator (Mill, 1873/2003).

An interesting and convenient foil to the Companions is found in the Dark Brotherhood: an order of assassins who will take on contracts to kill anyone in Skyrim, regardless of status, though their marks are typically civilians rather than the bandits targeted by the Companions. As such, the activities of the Dark Brotherhood are explicitly illegal, and generally regarded as immoral as well, as evidenced by the concise description of the Dark Brotherhood as "that accursed organization of cutthroats" in the fictional history book "A Brief History of the Empire", found in the game. The difference between how the Companions and the Dark Brotherhood are viewed and treated highlights an important distinction in the kind of violence that is permissible in Skyrim's society, and who the acceptable targets of violence are. Moreover, comparing the degree of legal leniency afforded to the Dark Brotherhood compared with the Thieves' Guild offers insight into the flexibility of Skyrim's legal and moral standards regarding different types of crime. One possible explanation for the discrepancy between these two illegal organizations is the fact that the Thieves' Guild does not encroach on the state's monopoly on violence, whereas the Dark Brotherhood does, while offering no benefit to the institutions of power as the Thieves' Guild does.

3.1.5. Violence and valour

Another possible factor in the contrasting opinions of Skyrim's citizens on the Companions and the Dark Brotherhood is their methods of enacting violence. Skyrim's Nordic culture places a great deal of value on honour, which is equated with facing one's foes in battle with courage and forthrightness.

> The heat of battle is the fire that forges the strongest blades. It's an old Nord proverb. That, and a true Nord never misses a chance to test her worth. (Uthgerd the Unbroken)

This kind of martial honour is epitomized in the Companions, whose combat style generally consists of charging valiantly into the fray, armed with a large sword and the belief that should they die nobly in battle, a glorious afterlife awaits them in Sovngarde, a plane of existence very similar to Valhalla of real-world Norse mythology.

> Glory in battle, honor in life. Deal with problems head on. Leave whispers and sneaking to the gutter rats who can't fight for themselves. (Kodlak Whitemane, Harbinger of the Companions)

The latter part of Kodlak's dialogue refers to a tactical approach favoured by the Dark Brotherhood. These assassins typically rely on stealth and subterfuge to eliminate their targets, striking at an opportune moment, and then disappearing before anyone notices that they were even there. This more covert approach to combat is generally looked down upon by mainstream Nord society, and is associated with weakness and cowardice. Whether by design or coincidence, we see here a stark example of Skyrim's hegemonic social mores being upheld in its legal and institutional contexts.

3.1.6. Gatekeeping: life on the margins

This disdain for what many Nords view as underhandedness manifests in racial stereotypes, specifically directed at the Khajiit, a race of bipedal feline humanoids. Otherized at first glance due to their furry appearance and vaguely 'foreign'-sounding accents,[12] the Khajiit are widely regarded as inherently criminal, and are barred from entering any of Skyrim's cities as a result.

> So many refuse to talk to us. They call us thieves and smugglers … Mostly it is the Nords. They do not like outsiders in their land, and so we are forbidden to enter the cities. When they look upon us, they see

[12] The Khajiiti accent is not clearly identifiable as any real-world accent. It resembles a blend of Russian, Arabic, and Spanish accents. Notable linguistic features include rolled 'r's, velar fricatives in place of 'h's, elongated and raised vowels, non-English intonation patterns, and absence of first-person and second-person pronouns (usually replaced with the person's name or "this one").

> only pickpockets and skooma[13] dealers. It is most unfair, but we do our best to ignore them. (Ahkari, Khajiit caravan trader)

> Worst thing is, nobody wants them in the cities. Nobody trusts them. … Reputation, mostly. A lot of Khajiit turn to smuggling and thievery to get by. A few bad apples spoil the bunch. You know how it is. (Ysolda, Nord citizen)

Being exiled from urban life, many Khajiit (41% of named Khajiit NPCs) work as caravan traders, travelling across Skyrim and selling their wares on the road and outside city gates. These caravans are the most prominent presence of Khajiit in Skyrim, and are likely where the player will have the most contact with them. However, one of the most involved interactions with Khajiit NPCs is available through the Thieves' Guild:

> They're shrewd traders and don't mind getting their hands dirty. I've bartered with their leader, Ri'saad, on more than one occasion. Actually, I want you to bring him something. You see, the caravans are notorious for transporting illegal substances. Present Ri'saad with this satchel of Moon Sugar, and I bet my last septim he'll make a deal. (Tonilia, Thieves' Guild fence)

Here, the stereotype associating the Khajiit with smuggling and drug-dealing is realized. That 41% of the Khajiit population in Skyrim are now implicated in criminal activity is quite telling. This stereotype fulfilment raises the question of whether the in-game events justify the prejudices held by the local Nords. While there are plenty of non-criminal Khajiit NPCs in Skyrim (albeit a minority, as a further 22% are thieves, assassins, bandits, and skooma addicts), nothing in the game content directly challenges the stereotype. In fact, even the game mechanics seem to support this characterization, granting night vision and skill bonuses in stealth, lockpicking, and pickpocketing to Khajiit player characters.[14] Between the natural racial traits of the Khajiit and the social ostracization and structural inequality they endure, it is difficult to say whether the game's dominant representation of the catlike people favours the nature or nurture side of the debate over behavioural determinants. Becker's (1973) labelling theory offers some insight here: being regarded as criminally predisposed due to their natural inclination for quiet movement and light fingers may produce a criminal self-identity among the Khajiit, while being denied entry to the cities results in reduced

[13] Skooma is an illegal narcotic substance, distilled from moon sugar, a spice commonly used in Khajiiti cuisine, which is also illegal outside of the Khajiiti home province of Elsweyr.

[14] All playable races receive certain racial stat bonuses associated with the dominant traits of the race in question.

opportunities to live and work by honest means. It is possible that the fulfilment of prejudicial stereotypes (e.g. criminality, propensity for drug addiction, general untrustworthiness) is in fact a consequence of the prejudice that relegates the Khajiit to the margins of society. A similar self-fulfilling prophecy is seen in many examples of real-world marginalized racial groups being criminalized and overrepresented in prison populations. Due to the cultural characteristics of the Khajiit (association with caravans and nomadic living, exclusion from cities), perhaps one of the most striking comparisons is the overrepresentation of Romani[15] people in European prisons: between twenty and fifty times the proportional size of the general population (Hernandez et al., 2000; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2014).

The overrepresentation of minority ethnic groups in prison populations is also explicitly portrayed in Cidhna Mine, one of the few prisons in Skyrim where the player character can meaningfully interact with other prisoners, all of whom are Orcs or Forsworn, both ethnic minorities in Skyrim. Orcs are a race of green-skinned humanoids with tusk-like teeth and horned brow ridges who generally live in longhouse-based settlements away from Nordic cities. The Forsworn are a militia group of humans indigenous to the Reach who oppose the Nordic and Imperial occupation of their homeland. They are generally recognizable by their facial tattoos and warpaint, their attire made mostly of fur and feathers, and their residence in tent-based settlements away from Nordic cities. The disproportionate incarceration rates of the Forsworn in particular is no accident, but a matter of policy designed to keep them under control:

> If someone joins the Forsworn, we haul him to the mines. (Thonar Silver-Blood)

The geographic and socio-political marginalization of these groups, combined with the visible characteristics drawn from colonial caricatures makes the comparison to real-world Indigenous peoples evident, if heavy-handed. Moreover, the fact that one of the richest representations of prison inmates in the game consists entirely of these Indigenous-esque groups is an important commentary on Skyrim's race relations, and a reflection of the pervasive issue of overrepresentation of Indigenous people in colonial prisons in the real world (see Department of Justice, 2017; Walker & Mcdonald, 1995;

[15] Also known as the Romany, Roma, or by the exonym "gypsies", which is regarded by some Romani people as a racial slur. Originating from the northern Indian subcontinent, the Romani are a traditionally nomadic ethnic group who now live mostly in Europe and the Americas.

Zinger, 2017), and the racialization of the prison-industrial complex (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008).

3.2. Study 2: Interviews with Players

This interview study examines how players construct meaning around mediated representations of social harm in videogames. Factors shaping this construction of meaning include the relationship between the player and their character, the way in which information about game content is conveyed to the player, the player's preferred playstyle, and the genre and context of gameplay.

3.2.1. Introducing participants

At the beginning of each interview, participants introduced themselves and offered any demographic information they deemed relevant and felt comfortable sharing. Their responses were used to create individual profiles, which provide context for their comments throughout the interview.

Table 3.2 Participant profiles

Name	Profile
Anthony	48-year-old white male. Works in intelligence for the UN. Has previously held positions in law enforcement, in both officer and civilian capacities. Mainly enjoys playing first-person shooter (FPS) games such as *Call of Duty* and strategy games such as *Civilization* and *Age of Empires*.
Ben	44-year-old white male. Works at a corrugator plant while studying for his computer systems certificate. Has previously served in the military and applied to be a police officer, but was not accepted. Has enjoyed a wide range of different videogame genres, and currently suited to playing in short bursts of 10-20 minutes, such as FPS games and certain action games such as the *Assassin's Creed* series.
Cory	27-year-old white male. Works as a delivery driver. Enjoys games that are conducive to free-roaming and exploration, such as *Skyrim* and *Grand Theft Auto*. Cory requested a joint interview with his partner, Morgan.
Daniel	26-year-old social worker. Has been playing videogames for around 15 years. Likes all kinds of games, especially trying new games that offer a unique experience compared to games he has played before. Daniel requested a joint interview with his partner, Paula.
Eric	29 years old, mixed race (half-white, half-East Indian/Melanesian), and identifies as gay and queer. Has been playing videogames since childhood, having grown up playing various fantasy and adventure games, RPGs, and platformers such as *Mario* on the Nintendo and Super Nintendo videogame consoles.
Fred	24-year-old white male. Employed full-time and has some university education. Has played many different videogames, currently is interested in games that offer a new experience, for which he prefers independent game developers. Fred requested a joint

	interview with his partner, Jessica.
Garrett	Pursued some post-secondary education in graphic design before ultimately deciding not to pursue a career in it due to the undesirable lifestyle of seasonal work he anticipated having in such a field. He enjoys sandbox-type games, where the player-character's decisions have a significant impact on the unfolding story and gameplay. Garrett also enjoys the tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons*, which is a major point of inspiration for many fantasy RPGs.
Harper	26 years old, white, transgender, non-binary, presents as masculine, uses they/them pronouns. Homeschooled by their mother, who stayed at home while father worked. Experienced abuse and neglect during childhood, did not receive much of the medical care they needed for conditions including wrist deformities, ADHD, and autism. Currently unemployed, holds BA in creative writing, studying linguistics part-time for another bachelor's degree. Aims to pursue a career in linguistics, studying communication between humans and artificial intelligence. Started playing videogames in 2013, not having been allowed to play them during their childhood.
Ilene	20-year-old white transgender woman. Enjoys team-oriented videogames, especially action, shooting, and science-fiction games.
Jessica	22-year-old woman. Studying psychology at university and working full-time in the summer as a camp coordinator. Prefers open-world games like *Skyrim* and *Fallout*, and micromanagement games like the *Sims* series. Recently started playing *Overwatch*, a team-based FPS game and the first competitive game she has enjoyed. Jessica requested a joint interview with her partner, Fred.
Karen	30-year-old white web developer from the southern United States. Holds a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. Has been playing videogames since she was six years old, and met her fiancé through online gaming. Particularly enjoys FPS and strategy games.
Lucy	27 years old. Holds degree in theatre. Bisexual. Has been playing videogames since childhood, especially Nintendo games such as *Pokémon*.
Morgan	Currently unemployed, and spends much of her time baking when not playing videogames. Prefers roleplaying adventure games, preferably in a fantasy setting, such as *Skyrim*, *Fable*, and *Diablo*. Cites *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* was the first game she ever fell in love with, and what got her hooked on videogames to begin with. Morgan requested a joint interview with her partner, Cory.
Nicole	25-year-old female PhD student with British and Jewish ancestry. Works as a consultant for a tech firm and a musician in the film industry. Prefers single player RPGs, strategy and puzzle games, and multiplayer games played locally with friends.
Olivia	34-year-old server administrator for a big company. Engaged to be married. Enjoys playing online, team-based games with friends.
Paula	25-year-old volunteer worker. Enjoys massively-multiplayer online games (MMOs), co-operative games, and *Stardew Valley*. Paula requested a joint interview with her partner, Daniel.
Quinn	30-year-old female biologist. Holds MSc in biology. Self-employed, working as a contractor. Started playing videogames at an early age, mostly her brother's single-player games. Now prefers playing multiplayer games with friends as a way of keeping in touch with those that have moved away
Rachel	19-year-old full-time student. Has been playing videogames since she was six years old, and currently enjoys co-op games like *Payday 2* and *The Division*. The recording of Rachel's interview was unfortunately inaudible, so her data are in the form of detailed notes taken during and immediately after the interview.

3.2.2. Modelling player-character relationships

Almost all participants stressed the importance of good character design, though with varying ideas of what that entails. Many participants wanted a high degree of customizability, often spending hours in the character customization menu to create exactly the kind of character they want. In Cory's words: "*If I'm not spending five hours customizing my character, then it's not good enough*." Other participants preferred to have a pre-set protagonist with a fixed identity, to allow for richer plot and character development.

> In general, I prefer predetermined [characters] … usually the story delivery is a lot better, because they only have to write a single story. You know, they've given you a character, and so this character basically conforms to their story, whereas if you make your character … say you've got ten choices, and in each choice you have three options, you know, that's ten to the power of however many, you know, many, many options. It's a massive exponential number of options, and so a story can only be so rigid with that, and usually you end up with a story that's a lot more loose. And by having a more loose story, it doesn't feel like it's actually, the story doesn't feel like it's been written for my character, or the world doesn't even feel like it's necessarily been created for my character, but my character exists in that world. Comparatively speaking, the one that you've been given, the character and the world gel very, very well together, if it's well-written, that is. And as a result it tends to be a lot more fun and smooth to play. (Nicole)

For some participants, it was important to be able to play as a character who reflected certain aspects of themselves. For example, Eric and Lucy both mentioned the importance of being able to play as LGBTQ+ characters, expressing their frustration with games that include romantic NPC interactions exclusively for heterosexual pairings. Gender was also an important factor for several participants, including Quinn, who said "*It really makes me happy to be able to play as a woman, and also to not be actively turned off by the portrayal of women in games.*" a sentiment echoed by Karen:

> I played [*Blade & Soul*] early on, right after release, and they had these little pop-ups that were like, 'Give us your feedback' like every five levels. And I kept asking for pants, because I wanted to be this big dragon woman and punch things, but they kept giving her these little bathrobe things, and I was getting a little frustrated. And then the Valentine's day event came out … and the male characters get all these classy tuxedos and whatever, and the women just got an oversized men's white shirt, and that was it. (Karen)

In contrast, several participants mentioned their preference for roleplaying a character who is entirely different from their own real-world persona.

> It's an escapism. I wouldn't do these things in real life, so let's do them. You know, I wouldn't go in and do half the things I do in games in real life … I guess I'd liken it to food. You wouldn't eat the same food every day. Well I live the same life every day, but I get to come and play on computers and play random things. (Olivia)

This diversity of perspectives about the merits of playing as characters who either resemble or are distinct from the player's identity reflects previous findings about player preferences regarding the (dis)similarity between player and character identities (Hart, 2017; Tychsen, McIlwain, Brolund, & Hitchens, 2007). Through analyzing the various perspectives offered by participants in this study, I have developed a preliminary model for describing the kinds of relationships that can exist between players and their characters (see Figure 3.1).

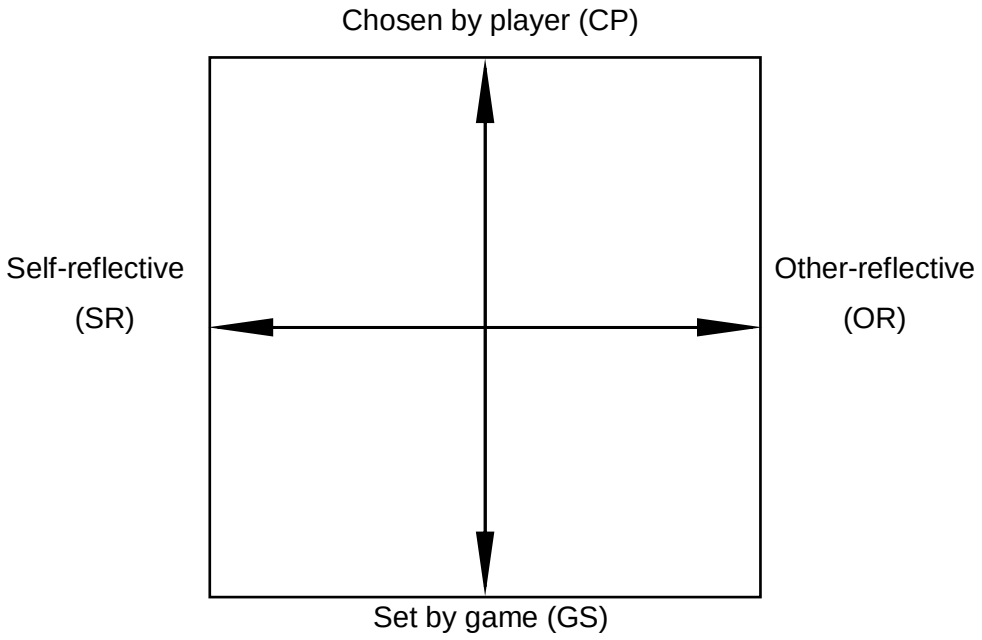


Figure 3.1 Player-character relationship model (PCRM)

The relationship between any given player and character can be described using this model by identifying the locus of the relationship along a series of continua. The x-axis plots character identity, which in this context refers to the sum total of the factors that make the character who they are, and can exist on a continuum between self-

reflective of the player, and reflective of some fictional other. For the participants in this study, important factors in a character's identity included their appearance, their abilities, their responses to in-game events, and their relationships with in-game characters. Character creation, plotted on the y-axis, refers to the relative degree of control held by players versus game developers over the identity of the player's character. Character creation covers both the process of designing the basic attributes of the character (e.g. appearance, abilities), as well as how the character develops over the course of the game, (e.g. how they interact with the game world, events, and characters).

To better illustrate how this framework operates, below are examples offered by participants of characters they have played and the kind of relationships they prefer:

> Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*. She's got a full backstory and history and, you know, her own emotions and stuff like that, so you can't necessarily step into her shoes as much. Because there's too much of a personality there. (Garrett)

> I usually just make a character that as closely resembles myself as possible … I've never really been one for acting, so I'd say that character's more an extension of myself rather than a persona to jump into. (Ilene)

> Let's say we have the ability to choose one of ten different countries or empires, I would certainly more likely choose something which is American, British, Canadian, French, something along the lines of the historical Allies in the First and Second World War. I would more likely choose them … rather than say choosing the Turkish Empire, the Ottoman Empire, a culture or a country which is historically from my cultural perspective been viewed as an enemy at one point in time … my overall preference would be one that I identify with, historically, as a winner. (Anthony)

> I've played *Dungeons & Dragons* type games for a while, so I do really enjoy playing characters that aren't me, and I make up little stories for them, you know, like, came across the ocean and is seeking pardon. (Karen)

Based on these descriptions, we can use the player-character relationship model to generate an approximate visual representation of these relationships (see Figure 3.2), with each letter on the chart representing the initial of the participant who offered the example. Given the absence of quantitative variables in my study design, I have not presumed to make claims about the degree of intensity of any of these example relationships in this preliminary version of the model. However, combining this model with a series of Likert-type scales for each axis could allow this kind of qualitative data to

be quantified, enabling statistical analysis of player-character relationships and more specific positioning of each data point on the model.

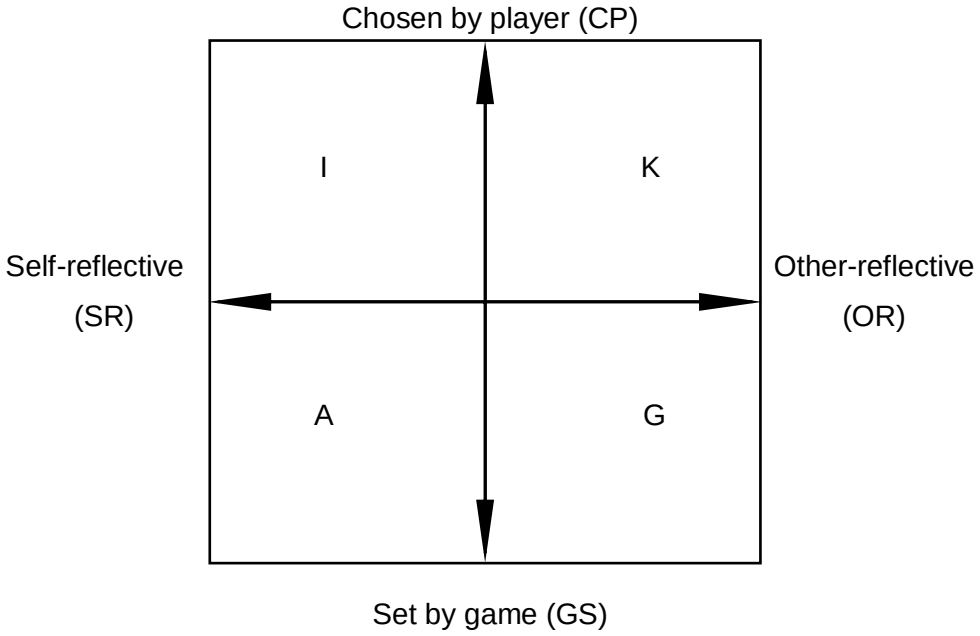


Figure 3.2 Example application of the PRCM

Consideration of the player-character relationship has not been prominently featured in much of the existing literature on videogames, but based on the findings from this study, I propose that it should be, for at least two reasons. This thesis rests on the premise that if a relationship exists between exposure to videogame content and real-world attitudes and behaviours, then this relationship may be moderated by the player's interpretation of that content and how they respond to it within the game (see active audience theory; Munday & Chandler, 2011). The results of this study suggest that these interpretations and responses may in turn be affected by the kind of relationship that exists between the player and their character, as I explain below. While definitive hypothesis-testing is beyond the scope of this study, these results could form the basis of future evidentiary claims of studies designed to test a hypothesis about how player-character relationships might affect the player's construction of meaning regarding videogame content.

3.2.3. Interpreting videogame content

To understand how players interpret videogame content, it is first necessary to understand the sources of the information being interpreted. Based on the results of this study, such information sources can be sorted into four broad categories: mechanical information, structural information, observational information, and interactive information. Mechanical information tends to be directly communicated to the player, without being filtered through the character's perspective, and generally does not form part of the game content that is subject to interpretation. Mechanical information includes things like tutorials or instructions on how to operate basic game functions such as character movement. Structural information is communicated to the player through structural cues, such as Lucy's example of indicators used to identify enemy NPCs: "*A lot of times there's a little red flag over their head.*" Structural information is distinct from mechanical information, in that it generally requires the player to make an assessment about what is being communicated in a given situation and how to respond to it, rather than simply following instructions on how to operate basic game mechanics. Observational information refers to any kind of game content that can be perceived through basic observation, such as cutscenes or aesthetic cues. This kind of information generally requires some degree of interpretation by the player in order to understand and evaluate the message being conveyed by the game about the content in question.

> Yeah, I guess it's tropes when it comes down to it. But like, you know, if they're there and they look like, god I can't say, how to say they look like a shopkeeper. But you know, if they look friendly, they're not donned in tons of armor, or they've not got like a hooded cowl on … If they look like an old grizzled hag in like a dark robe with shiny knives sticking out of places then I'm probably not going to be too friendly. (Olivia)

> In the first cutscene, before you even have any gameplay, you tend to get a little bit of worldbuilding. You can understand, is there drastic income inequality? Is there some form of racialization issue, be it skin colour vs. whatever, or is there a sexist vibe? You tend to get this in the first hour of a game, and then if I want more, then I tend to talk to NPCs, dig deeper, try and follow all of the conversation trees, as many conversation trees as I can. (Nicole)

Nicole's example of NPC conversations falls under the category of interactive information, which requires the player to actively interact with the game content through their character, in contrast with passively observing content such as a cutscene. Like

observational information, interactive information tends to require a high degree of interpretation from the player, having an additional layer of subjectivity based on the way in which the player's character approaches such interactions. These four categories of information are not necessarily discrete or mutually exclusive. Rather, they demonstrate a continuum of interpretability, from largely objective comprehension of mechanical information at one end to largely subjective interpretation of interactive information on the other.

Several participants commented on how their interpretation or attitude towards certain instances of game content depended on the kind of character they were playing. This variation in interpretive stances was particularly pronounced in how participants viewed the representation of law enforcement NPCs:

> It depends on the character that I'm playing. *Stick of Truth* was a good one for this, because it's *South Park*, so I walked in and trashed the police station. It's *South Park*, what else are you supposed to do? A lot of times in the games I play, law enforcement is working for me. As an Inquisitor or a Warden [in *Dragon Age*], you command. Although in [*Dragon Age*] 2 that was different. When you're playing as Hawke for the first act and a half-ish, you are held back by law enforcement … I was playing as a mage, and obviously if you're playing as mage-Hawke, there's a whole level of law enforcement that goes into that with the Circle and the Templars, you not only have to watch out for the law enforcement who hate you because you're poor and an immigrant, you have to watch out for the Templars who want to lock you up because you're a mage. (Lucy)

> Most of the time in these kinds of games, you're playing heroes that are more or less above the law, or you consider them above the law, because usually guard-type characters are pretty lame, and stupid, and not sympathetic … I guess more movies and stuff have police as the good guys, or whatever, but a lot of games are like, the outsider has to take the law into their own hands, that's just kind of a story-telling dynamic that's pretty common … I guess the whole thread of the first *Mass Effect* game is that you are basically a high-ranking black ops person, but then the bureaucracy is bad at making decisions, so you have to do things yourself because they don't believe you … And like I was saying, I played some *Payday 2*, but you're basically robbers and you have to kill the cops, and I was like, nahh, this is not for me, I don't want to do that. (Quinn)

These examples illustrate a variety of possible interpretations and attitudes towards law enforcement NPCs, ranging from allies to inherent enemies to incidental obstacles in the way of the protagonist's main quest. Moreover, the specific interpretation can be influenced by the type of character being played, as well as the player's own attitudes

towards law enforcement. In Quinn's discussion of *Payday 2*, the character is evidently meant to see the police as an opposing force, but her own discomfort with the idea of killing police officers' conflicts with her character's motivations, resulting in a kind of cognitive dissonance. Several participants mentioned similar experiences of feeling disconnected from the game when confronted with a representation or situation with which they disagreed.

> If I do feel pigeonholed into doing something I don't want to do, it does break my immersion. Like I said, I want to be calm and do whatever I feel like I want to do in videogames, and so when I'm forced to kill someone I don't want to kill, I'm like, well that's shitty. I kind of want to stop playing now. (Jessica)

Other participants found it easier to reconcile this kind of cognitive dissonance, such as Rachel, who shared her experiences playing *Tom Clancy's The Division*, a videogame in which she perceives law enforcement to be represented as unaccountable and "*just there to take what they can*" from residents of a crisis-stricken New York City. Despite this negative representation and Rachel's critical view of real-world law enforcement, she still enjoys playing the game, and named it among her current favourites. These examples demonstrate how the construction of meaning around game content is influenced by a combination of factors including character motivations, player attitudes, and how those two factors interact – in other words, the relationship between player and character.

3.2.4. Responding to videogame content: ludo-moral decision-making

Because many videogames require players to make decisions about how to respond to situations as they unfold in real time, interpretation of game content can be very closely bound up with responding to that content. Through talking to participants about how they approached such decisions, particularly those pertaining to situations involving social harm, I have identified four general playstyles or approaches to ludo-moral decision-making (see section 1.1.3. for more information on ludology). The first is the c*omfort zone* playstyle, which refers to a pattern of decision-making that resembles how the player would act if presented with the in-game situation in real life. C*omfort zone* players, such as Paula, tend to favour prosocial approaches to in-game challenges insofar as they line up with their personal sense of right and wrong: *"[I like to play] good people, every time. I really like to be in virtual life the same as in reality life. And I choose*

every time good people because I like to be good." Some c*omfort zone* players may experience discomfort when considering a more socially harmful approach to an in-game situation:

> It's really difficult for me to be malicious, just because, because you can just be malicious. I try to go about a fair route, which I think reflects how I would go about it if it were the real world. Something that's just and fair. (Eric)

> I feel bad playing a character that does bad things, and so every game I play, I feel like I'm like, the goody-two-shoes … I'm so anxious about doing bad things, I can't even do bad things in a videogame … If there's any chance I can talk something out or prevent someone from dying, I will do that instead. (Jessica)

The next playstyle, c*uriosity*, allows for a much wider range of behaviours. Unsurprisingly, this playstyle covers a pattern of decision-making based on curiosity about potential outcomes and how they affect subsequent plot development, and often involves roleplaying as a character that is markedly different from the player's real-world persona. Many participants discussed playing a game multiple times and choosing different options each time to see what would happen.

> If I was playing the game the second time, and I'd already picked option A the first time, I would definitely pick option B the second time because I want to see all the content. (Olivia)

Some curiosity players may begin in the comfort zone before transitioning to the curiosity playstyle on subsequent playthroughs of a game.

> The first playthrough is usually more of an embodiment of me, and then if I play a second, third time I might play around with different playstyles, just to see different options in the game, and different stories. (Eric)

Others may take the reverse approach, first favouring a c*atharsis* playstyle (see below) before eventually replaying the game with more of a c*uriosity* approach.

> Well usually for me, the first time I go through, I usually like slaughtering and killing and pillaging, because I like being the evil character. And then I have to go through and play through it again, and I have to change all my actions, all my decisions, and be the good character. (Morgan)

For some *curiosity* players, roleplaying a more 'evil'-type character can be difficult to maintain in the face of feelings of guilt or cognitive dissonance. In Quinn's words: *"Even*

when I try not to [be good], I'm bad at being bad." Some such players may try to circumvent these feelings while still satisfying their curiosity, such as Fred, who recounts how he chose the more socially harmful option to see the outcome before reloading a previous save file and choosing a different option to assuage his guilt:

> Jessica: What about blowing up Nuketown?
>
> Fred: I never did that
>
> Jessica: No, me neither
>
> Fred: I did that with a quicksave, just to see what would happen
>
> Jessica: But you couldn't bear to let it actually stay blown up?
>
> Fred: No, no, especially later when I found out that Moira reappears as a ghoul, if you blow up Nuketown, and she accosts you and yells at you for blowing up the town, and it's like, oh, well I could never do that, then.

The *catharsis* playstyle generally involves playing very aggressively, often favouring violent or socially harmful approaches to in-game situations as a way of releasing pent-up frustration from everyday life.

> There are some times when I just want to go and smash things with a hammer, because I'm in a bad mood or I've had a bad day, or I'm just unhappy, and kind of taking out any aggression on fake people is far preferable to taking it out on real people. (Harper)
>
> Yeah, I kind of like being the evil guy actually. Yeah, just because it's fantasy, right? Like you're in the game, and there's just something that I guess I wouldn't do in everyday life, so it doesn't necessarily obviously follow your own moral or ethics code in real life, but it's just something that you can do in games. (Ben)

Ben's reasoning for why he likes to play the "evil guy" is echoed by a number of other participants, and can be broken down into two main justifications. The first is the desire to virtually live out a fantasy, free of mundane restrictions like traditional morality or real-world ability.

> Evil all the way, it doesn't matter what happens, I'll kill anyone and for the fun of it. I mean, I'm sick of games portraying my character like the messiah, the one that's going to just save the world. I just want to play the bad guy, make a ton of money, bribe everyone and live a happy life somewhere with a cocktail in my hand. (Daniel)

> I usually go with the darker side of me. I usually end up playing in a world of, if I could, I would. You know, it usually ends up being darker wishes, you know, I'm not careful, I'm quite clumsy myself, so I usually go with the careful sneak thief, kind of. You know, I'm not sneaky. I'm not good at sneaking up on people. I have to have the volume up loud so I can actually hear everything, whereas if I was in that world, as the character, I'd be able to hear everything. So I usually play to exactly what I'm not, in a sense, but I also play without inhibition. (Morgan)

The second justification is a lack of real-world consequences for performing socially harmful acts. Within the virtual world of the videogame, *catharsis* players are free to act out their fantasies or vent their frustrations without having to worry about the harm their actions would cause if enacted in the real world.

> Usually it's what I would like to do, what I would prefer to do. You know, in real life, I'm not going to walk up to someone and stab them, my personal morality kicks in. However, it's a video game, I can do whatever I want without any consequences. So I'm going to run up to them and stab them. Because it's fun for me. (Morgan)

Even in a virtual world where there are no meaningful consequences, some *catharsis* players still place limits on what they are willing to do within the game, based on what they can reconcile with their real-life sense of morality.

> Like if it goes in and says okay you've got to go and kill this guy, okay fine, I'll go and kill the guy, no problem. So I don't have a problem with that. But if all of a sudden, and I've never been asked in the game to do anything like that, but if someone says you've got to go teach this woman a lesson, so you've got to go rape this woman, well that's not going to fly with me. (Ben)

The fourth approach to in-game decision-making is *cost-benefit analysis*, which as the name implies, involves assessing the potential risks and rewards of any given decision, and then pursuing the option that offers the greatest net gain.

> It kind of comes down to me, like weighing it up and working out where I can, how far I can push the boundary before it getting to the point where, oh right, yeah yeah, like, that's really detrimental to me now if I do that. (Olivia)

None of the participants in this study seemed to favour a pure *cost-benefit analysis* playstyle. Most participants preferred making decisions along the lines of one of the other playstyles unless the material outcome of the decision in question outweighed the importance of any moral or roleplaying considerations.

> Occasionally I'll go for the reward, in situations where I don't see a strong moral reason to go one way or the other, I'll definitely look up what the better reward is. (Lucy)

> If it's something that's going to affect my character permanently, so to say, like this will change your stats or something like that, I'll put a great deal more thought into it and say, okay my character needs to have these certain stats and I want to make sure that they have those stats, instead of going down a different path. (Ilene)

From these various examples, we see how the player-character relationship may interact with how players respond to game content. *Comfort zone* players like Jessica will likely prefer to play self-reflective characters (at least in terms of character behaviour and morals) and have a strong degree of choice in the way their character behaves, while *curiosity* players may be more at ease with an other-reflective character whose actions are more directed by the game's plot. *Catharsis* players like Daniel may be comfortable with other-reflective characters, but will probably prefer a higher degree of player choice over the character's behaviour because of their desire for a less restricted gameplay experience. For *cost-benefit analysis* players, the relative importance of a certain risk or reward may be dictated by their character's priorities, whether those priorities are chosen by the player or set by the game. Overall, the player-character relationship has the potential to factor into a wide variety of approaches to how players respond to videogame content.

3.2.5. The need for targeted research by gameplay context and genre

Almost every single participant in this study at some point qualified their response to an interview question with the comment "*It depends on the game*" or similar. Some participants additionally expressed concerns that taking such a broad-scoped approach to this research would present challenges when trying to analyze the results from participants with profoundly different gaming experiences.

> I do think that games as a whole is a very very large umbrella term … so even if you have a subgenre within an art form, that's still not necessarily informative on the kind of thing that the person does. So I think that it's impressive that you're taking on this research, but I imagine that you're going to be getting incredibly diverse responses. (Nicole)

Indeed, participants discussed a wide variety of types of games, both in terms of genre (e.g. RPG, FPS, strategy, simulation, platformer, racing) and context of gameplay (e.g.

single player, local multiplayer, MMO, co-operative, competitive). The pilot project that preceded this study was designed with a focus on RPGs in mind, based on the assumption that because RPGs tend to offer the greatest degree of player choice (as opposed to more linear games that guide the player through fixed objectives), interviewing participants about their experiences with RPGs would yield the richest data. However, after one participant shared his experiences with strategy games and demonstrated their relevance to the research questions, I decided to broaden the scope of this study to include a wider variety of videogames. That said, I also considered the feedback from participants regarding the difficulty of making broad statements about videogames in general that accurately reflect their specific experiences with different types of game. If we accept the notion that the construction of meaning around videogame content may be influenced by factors such as the specific representation of that content and the orientation of the player-character relationship relative to that content, perhaps we should also consider the possibility that the type of interaction required by the game as a result of its genre or context of gameplay could likewise have an effect. Nicole offers an example illustrating this possibility:

> Unlike first-person shooters, where you have a gun so everything's a target, it's like being given a hammer, everything's a nail. Whereas in RPGs, you tend to be given many tools, and so depending on which tools you've chosen, they're the ones you're going to use. (Nicole)

Future research on videogames should therefore account for these variables and study their impact before making sweeping claims about the effects of videogames in general.

Chapter 4.

Discussion

The purpose of this project was to answer two research questions: 1) How is social harm represented in videogames? 2) How do players construct meaning around videogame content relating to social harm? In Study 1, narrative themes pertaining to the representation of social harm in *Skyrim* included crime and punishment, wealth and power, extrajudicial crime control, legal and social legitimacy of violence, and the criminalization of race. Study 2 revealed how the interpretation of mediated representations in videogames and the ways players respond to those representations can be shaped by the relationship between the player and their character, and ludic elements such as preferred playstyle, different sources of game information, and the genre and context of gameplay.

4.1. Implications of Findings

The results of the case study on *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* offer a preliminary view of the diversity of mediated representations that can be present in videogames. The various ways that people, institutions, and events are represented in *Skyrim* are not merely objective representations of these fictional phenomena. The mechanical constraints placed on the player character's available actions, the kinds of quests and missions they are asked to undertake, and the comments made by NPCs about various in-game situations all form part of a mediated representation of the phenomena in question. When examining such representations, one must consider the context in which they were constructed. These are not standalone stories that spontaneously come into existence to teach players about some fictional universe. Rather, these representations were consciously constructed by videogame developers in the context of our real world, and as such are subject to the kind of social and cultural influences that may inform the perspectives of those game developers. Based on the theoretical premises of symbolic interactionism and cultural criminology, we may expect the meanings that players construct around these representations to reflect their understandings of analogous real-wold phenomena. Such phenomena include

retributive justice, due process, sentencing principles, racial profiling, racial overrepresentation in prisons, prison labour, police pluralisation, state monopoly on the legitimation of violence, organized and white-collar crime, and the failure to prosecute criminals whose interests align with those of hegemonic institutions of power. All of these issues are patently relevant to the field of criminology. While claims about the strength and direction of the relationship between in-game/real-world constructions of meaning are beyond the scope of this study, these results begin to lay the groundwork for future research to examine this relationship and elucidate why criminologists should care about it.

Just as the mediated representations present in videogames do not spontaneously spring into existence, and instead are consciously created by game developers, so too are such representations actively interpreted by players, rather than being passively consumed without critical thought. The results of the interviews conducted in Study 2 demonstrate that videogame players are active audiences, whose individual attitudes and perspectives shape the way they perceive and interpret the information conveyed by the games they play. The role of the player as active audience highlights the importance of not studying games or players in isolation, but in terms of how they interact. Moreover, the way that the player's perspective interacts with that of their character can have a considerable impact on the meaning-making process, which makes consideration of the player-character relationship crucial to fully understanding this process. The need for consideration of this relationship is supported in existing literature (Kujanpää et al., 2007; Taylor, 2002; Westecott, 2009), summarized most eloquently by Yee (2006): "our virtual identities and experiences are not separate from our identities and experiences in the material world. They co-evolve as they shape each other" (p. 200).

Perhaps the most noteworthy implication of this research is the model created to account for the different types of relationships between players and characters. Though still in its infancy, the player-character relationship model provides a basic framework for describing and categorizing such relationships, making the inclusion of the player-character relationship as a variable in future research more feasible. This variable could also be quantified by combining the PCRM with Likert-type scales for each axis of the model, although further testing may be required to establish a degree of reliability. Moreover, the self/other-reflective axis may require a combination of several Likert-type

scales to account for the various traits that comprise player/character identity. Borrowing from Vella's (2014a) semiotic structure of game characters, we can organize such traits into categories such as represented elements (name, physical appearance, costume, voice, animations/body language), contextual elements (possessions, gameworld environment, role in relation to environment/events), ludic elements (capabilities and limitations, goals, and passivities or ways in which the character is influenced by other gameworld entities), and dynamic mimetic elements (player/character actions and decisions). The data from these scales could be averaged to obtain a single data point to plot on the PCRM, or weighted according to the importance of each trait as reported by the participant. In any case, the PCRM can at least provide a foundation for future research to build upon in pursuit of an operational definition that accounts for the player-character relationship. Interestingly, a similar model for conceptualizing this relationship exists, proposed by Vella in 2014 (see Figure 4.1). While the PCRM was developed without prior knowledge of Vella's model for the player-figure relation, the fact that we independently and through dissimilar methodology arrived at similar conclusions about how to model player-character relationships suggests that this conceptualization has some merit.

The vertical axis of Vella's model plots the subjectivity/objectivity of the relations between players and figures (Vella's term to refer to the player's character/avatar), referring to the figure's position as a subject with whom the player shares a perspective, or as an object that the player observes from an external perspective. This objective/subjective relation is different from the vertical axis of the PCRM, which plots the degree of player control over the character, although there is some overlap. Vella's analysis of Conway, the player character in *Kentucky Route Zero*, demonstrates how, at different points throughout a game, the figure may occupy different positions relative to the player, resulting in a complex, fluid relationship between player and figure as self and other, and subject and object. The figure's position on the self/other axis is moderated to some degree by the objective/subjective relation, insofar as the player's identification with the figure as self is partially dependent on their shared subjective perspective. Under the PCRM, the relationship is somewhat more fixed, although fluctuations along each axis are possible throughout the course of a game, depending on the facets of identity that are most salient at any given moment, and the degree of control the player has at different points (e.g. cutscene vs. multiple-choice dialogue vs.

freeform active gameplay). The axes of the PCRM are also more independent of one another, insofar as the position on the self/other axis is not inherently dictated by the position on the game/player control axis or vice versa, although some interaction is possible here as well. For example, several participants in Study 2 mentioned a sense of cognitive dissonance or "immersion breaking" when confronted with a situation in which they felt forced to act in a way that did not match their preferred approach to the situation, resulting in a breakdown of the relationship between player and character. Moreover, the PCRM goes beyond how the player perceives the gameworld and their character's place in it, focusing instead on how the player may act on the gameworld through their character and how that character's identity is constructed through the player's actions and decisions. In this sense, the PCRM captures the ludic elements of the player-character relationship, and conceives of the player as actor, rather than audience, as is the case in Vella's player-figure model.

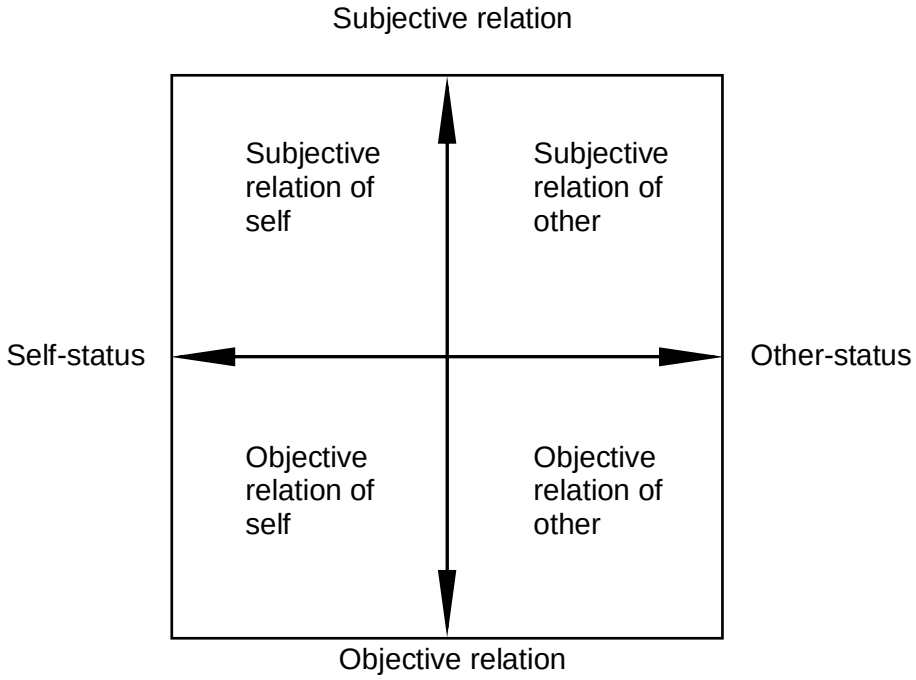


Figure 4.1 A model for the player-figure relation.

Note: Adapted from "Player and Figure: An Analysis of a Scene in Kentucky Route Zero." By D. Vella, 2014b, Proceedings of DiGRA 2014 Conference: <Verb that ends in 'ing'> the <noun> of Game <plural noun>, p. 5.

The findings from the interviews also demonstrated how the interpretation of and response to videogame content can be shaped by the player's preferred approach to ludic decision-making with respect to morally salient game content (i.e. game content pertaining to social harm). These findings yielded a basic system of classification for different ludo-moral decision-making patterns, or playstyles: *comfort zone, curiosity, catharsis,* and *cost-benefit analysis*. While this is certainly not an exhaustive list of all possible approaches to making decisions about how to respond to social harm in videogames (for example, see Ribbens & Malliet, 2015), it serves as a starting point for future research to consider how players' constructions of and orientations towards morality may shape their approach to interacting with game content. Furthermore, the findings that led to the generation of the ludo-moral decision-making taxonomy present a counterpoint to the "moral disengagement in videogames" model (Hartmann, 2017). To summarize, this model holds that although players may view NPCs as moral agents in the game context, they are able to diminish the cognitive dissonance and guilt associated with enacting violence against these moral agents through moral disengagement. However, the existence of *comfort zone* players, and the limitations on acceptable violence held by *curiosity* and even *catharsis* players suggests that moral disengagement is not universal or absolute. Through specific consideration of the moral dimensions of player decisions, the ludo-moral decision-making taxonomy differs from previous player taxonomies, which have focused more on individual and interpersonal dimensions of player actions (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2006a). Moreover, the ludo-moral decision-making taxonomy is based on the premise that the meaning of morality in any given decision-making opportunity is constructed by the player, shaped by their individually held beliefs and lived experiences, rather than being dictated by the game's definitions of good and evil. As such, the categories under this taxonomy refer not only to the purported morality of the available actions in the game context, but also to the player's understanding of and orientation to those actions and their moral status. This view of ludo-moral decision-making complements Schulzke's (2009) analysis of moral decision-making in games such as *Fallout 3*, which holds that moral systems in videogames are less about imposing a set of moral prescriptions (defined by the game developers) on the player, and more about giving players the opportunity to construct a view of morality based on the consequences of morally salient actions.

In the wake of the Gamergate controversy, one of the major critiques of the videogame industry and many gaming communities surrounding it is the marginalization of women and LGBTQ+ people (Braithwaite, 2014, 2016, Shaw, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2015). I am therefore grateful to have had the opportunity to listen to and document the voices of women and LGBTQ+ people, who made up a considerable proportion of the participants in this study, and who offered unique and informative perspectives on the representation of marginalized identities in videogames. While the results of this study are not representative of the larger population, they do begin to fill in the gaps in our body of knowledge about videogames, which has historically sidelined gender and sexual minorities.

4.2. Limitations and Lessons Learned

In contrast with the relatively high proportion of women and LGBTQ+ people who volunteered for the study, the sample included very few people of colour, whose voices and identities have also been historically relegated to the margins in videogames (Consalvo, 2003; Dietrich, 2013; Everett & Watkins, 2008; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Hitchens, 2011; Janz & Martis, 2003; Leonard, 2005; Shaw, 2012; D. Williams et al., 2009). Given that representation in videogames is demonstrably important for other marginalized groups, the perspectives of people of colour on the representation of race and ethnicity in videogames would be invaluable. As evidenced by the results of Study 1, race relations can feature quite prominently in some videogames, at least to the extent that fictional races can be considered analogous to racial groupings in the real world. Other games may offer a more direct reflection of real-world race relations. Such a limited view of how such representations are perceived and interpreted by players, particularly players of colour, is therefore a major limitation of Study 2.

Some of the most important lessons for me came out of my research journal, which I kept as a way of documenting my process as a researcher, and the thoughts and feelings I experienced over the course of writing this thesis. Keeping a research journal was crucial for exercising reflexivity in my work and addressing any sources of bias. Like all researchers, my lived experiences and their influence on how I perceive the world are impossible to ignore. While no research is ever entirely objective and unbiased due to the conscious or unconscious assumptions and epistemologies that are shaped by the researcher's lived experiences, the nature of qualitative research brings

the fallacy of true objectivity into sharper focus. It was therefore important for me to be conscientious about the biases I was bringing to my research, and to work to mitigate their effects as much as possible. For example, during the data analysis phase of Study 2, I made sure to take note of the thoughts and emotions I experienced regarding each theme as it emerged in order to avoid subconsciously favouring certain themes over others based on my personal, unacknowledged feelings about them.

Another lesson from my research journal, which was particularly helpful, was thinking about the specificity of language used in interview questions. Many of the interview questions were phrased along the lines of "How do you tend do…?" (e.g. approach moral decision-making opportunities), which prompted the common response "It depends on the game," reflecting the difficulty of making broad statements about videogames in general. Perhaps a more appropriate way of phrasing the question might have been "Please share your experiences with…?" or "Could you please talk about a time when you…?" Offering participants the opportunity to recall and relate their experiences without trying to make a generalized statement about them may have yielded more fruitful results, and at the very least, it could have made some participants feel more at ease about answering such questions.

The difficulty of making generalized statements about videogames might also be somewhat alleviated by breaking them down by genre and context of gameplay. As the videogame industry continues to grow, the diversity of game genres and gameplay contexts grows with it, resulting in a vast array of different modes of interaction with game content. As noted in the results from Study 2, the way players perceive, interpret, and interact with videogame content may be moderated by the type of game in question. For more than a surface-level understanding of how players respond to videogames, a more targeted analysis is required. While the results from Study 2 were valuable, a more narrowly focused scope that focused on a single genre or context may have provided deeper, more specific insights. That said, the breadth of the scope of this study brought the need for targeted analysis by genre or context into focus, as well as offering some preliminary insights into some of the different ways that players respond to games of various genres and contexts.

4.3. Directions for Future Research

One of the main goals for this research project was to provide a starting point for future research on aspects of videogames not previously examined. In that sense, this project is a success, identifying three key areas for future investigation: the player-character relationship, the approach to ludo-moral decision-making, and the game's genre and context of gameplay. For the participants in Study 2, these factors had a demonstrable influence on the way players interpret and interact with videogame content. It will be necessary to first develop operational definitions for these variables, at which point they should be accounted for in future research on videogames where applicable.

Much of the interest driving videogame research has been based on the idea that exposure to videogames produces some sort of cognitive, affective, or behavioural outcome in the real world. The theoretical underpinnings of this thesis hold that such outcomes are not the result of mere exposure to videogames, but are the product of an active audience interpreting and constructing meaning around the content to which they are exposed. While the findings from this research project provide preliminary support for this theory, further examination is required to understand fully the complexities of how meaning is constructed around game content, and the relationship between those constructed meanings and real-world attitudes and behaviours. One possible avenue for elucidating these issues is to analyze trends in the mediated representations in popular videogames and compare the views of players in relation to such representations. Alternatively, following the theme of pursuing more specific and targeted analysis mentioned above, a future study could identify specific analogies to real-world phenomena represented in videogames and examine the attitudes of players regarding such analogies and their real-world counterparts.

As evidenced by some of the existing literature on videogames, specifically their effects on aggression levels in players, at least part of the reason behind the interest in this kind of research stems from the Columbine High School massacre, and a desire to predict and prevent similar atrocities. Recalling that the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre were adolescents, aged 17 and 18, prompts the question of how age and developmental stage might moderate any relationship between videogame exposure and real-world behaviour. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) and other

similar bodies provide content advisories, including age ratings for videogames to help consumers make informed decisions about whether a game is suitable for them or their children to play. The rating system used by the ESRB "was devised in 1994 after consulting a wide range of child development and academic experts, analyzing other rating systems and conducting nationwide research with parents" (Entertainment Software Rating Board, n.d.). While the counsel of experts and the opinions of parents are an important consideration, an evidence-based rating system firmly grounded in an empirical understanding of how people of different ages and developmental stages react to videogame content would further help consumers make informed decisions about the kinds of games they purchase for themselves and their children. To this end, a key direction for future research on this topic is to examine the role of age or developmental stage in the construction of meaning around videogame content.

At the start of this thesis, I posited that the greater degree of interactivity between audience and medium in videogames, as opposed to other media like film, positions players as inherently active audiences. While this research project was not designed to test such a hypothesis, determining the relative impact of different types of media on consumers' attitudes and behaviour would be valuable to anyone seeking to observe or control the salience of messages conveyed through media. One possible way to do this would be to examine the attitudes held by participants about a certain topic covered by a mediated representation and compare those attitudes or the intensity thereof before and after exposure to the representation as conveyed by different media forms.

This discussion has so far primarily focused on examining videogames at the consumer end. However, as previously mentioned, videogames are a product of the cultural contexts in which they are created, and the mediated representations featured in them are the result of decisions made by game developers who inhabit these cultural contexts. It could therefore be informative to research the motivations behind game developers' decisions about what kind of content they include in their games, and how it is represented.

4.4. Conclusion

In summary, this thesis draws on existing theoretical and empirical literature, as well as original findings to present a case for why and how videogames can and ought to

be studied within the field of criminology. Cultural criminology in particular lends itself to the study of videogames in terms of their mediated representations of criminality, crime control, and social harm more broadly, and how those representations are interpreted and acted upon by players. Study 1 demonstrates how representations of social harm in videogames can operate as a site for the construction of meaning around criminological phenomena, while Study 2 provides more specific insights on some of the factors that can shape players' construction of meaning. Taken together, these studies demonstrate the importance of studying videogames, not in isolation as either purely narrative media or ludological systems, but in terms of how players make sense of both their narrative and ludic elements. These findings build on an existing body of knowledge about videogames and their place in a broader cultural context and pave the way for future research to further elucidate the extent and manner of their influence.

References

Aarseth, E. (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Aarseth, E. (2000). Computer Game Studies, Year One. *Game Studies*, *1*(1). Retrieved from http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html

Aarseth, E. (2004). Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation. In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (p. 45). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Aarseth, E. (2012). A narrative theory of games. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (pp. 129–133). Raleigh, North Carolina.

Achtman, R. L., Green, C. S., & Bavelier, D. (2008). Video games as a tool to train visual skills. *Restorative Neurology and Neuroscience*, *26*(4–5), 435–446. Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18997318

Allen, J. J., & Anderson, C. A. (2018). Satisfaction and frustration of basic psychological needs in the real world and in video games predict internet gaming disorder scores and well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *84*, 220–229. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.02.034

Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2001). Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior : A Meta-Analytic Review of the Scientific Literature. *Psychological Science*, *12*(5), 353–359.

Anderson, C. A., & Dill, K. E. (2000). Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *78*(4), 772–790. https://doi.org/10.1037//O022-3514.78.4.772

Anderson, C. A., Gentile, D., & Dill, K. E. (2012). Prosocial, Antisocial, and Other Effects of Recreational Video Games. *Handbook of Children and the Media*, 249–272.

Anderson, C. A., Shibuya, A., Ihori, N., Swing, E. L., Bushman, B. J., Sakamoto, A., … Saleem, M. (2010). Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in eastern and western countries: a meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *136*(2), 151–173. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018251

Ashford, R. (2012). *An Issue of Perceptions: Mental Illness, the Police and the Media*. Athabasca University.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Banks, S. (2014, December 5). Police expectations damage black men's realities. *LA Times*. Retrieved from http://www.latimes.com/local/crime/la-me-1206-banks-black-stereotypes-20141206-column.html

Bartholow, B. D., Sestir, M., & Davis, E. B. (2005). Correlates and consequences of exposure to video game violence: hostile personality, empathy, and aggressive behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *31*(11), 1573–1586. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167205277205

Bartle, R. (1996). Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who suit MUDs. *Journal of MUD Research*, *6*(1), 39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00256-004-0875-6

Baskin, D. R., & Sommers, I. B. (2010). Crime-Show-Viewing Habits and Public Attitudes Toward Forensic Evidence: The "CSI Effect" Revisited. *Justice System Journal*, *31*(1), 97–113.

Beasley, B., & Collins Standley, T. (2002). Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games. *Mass Communication and Society*, *5*(3), 279–293. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0503_3

Becker, H. (1973). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.

Behrenshausen, B. G. (2013). The active audience, again: Player-centric game studies and the problem of binarism. *New Media and Society*, *15*(6), 872–889. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812462843

Bethesda Softworks. (2016). Skyrim Special Edition Unveiled for PS4, Xbox One and PC. Retrieved from https://bethesda.net/en/article/1qilO7iV16gAQYwgeKog62/skyrim-special-edition-unveiled-for-ps4-xbox-one-and-pc

Bloom, P. (2014, November 26). Racial Fearmongering and Ferguson: US Stereotype of "violent" African-American Men as old as Slavery. *Informed Comment*. Retrieved from http://www.juancole.com/2014/11/fearmongering-stereotype-american.html

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Braithwaite, A. (2014). "Seriously, get out": Feminists on the forums and the War(craft) on women. *New Media and Society*, *16*(5), 703–718. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813489503

Braithwaite, A. (2016). It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity. *Social Media and Society*, *2*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672484

Brewer, P. R., & Ley, B. L. (2010). Media use and public perceptions of dna evidence. *Science Communication*, *32*(1), 93–117. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547009340343

Brewer, R. M., & Heitzeg, N. A. (2008). The Racialization of Crime and Punishment: Criminal Justice, Color-Blind Racism, and the Political Economy of the Prison Industrial Complex. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *51*(5), 625–644.

Brownstein, H. (1995). The Media and Construction of Random Drug Violence. In J. Ferrell & C. Sanders (Eds.), *Cultural Criminology* (pp. 45–65). Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Căşvean, T. M. (2015). Landmarks for the Contemporary Analysis of the Video Games: A new possible general scheme of analysis. *Cultural Intertexts*, *4*(2), 35–48.

Chan, P. A., & Rabinowitz, T. (2006). A cross-sectional analysis of video games and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms in adolescents. *Annals of General Psychiatry*, *5*(1), 16. https://doi.org/10.1186/1744-859X-5-16

Charlton, J. P. (2002). A factor-analytic investigation of computer 'addiction' and engagement. *British Journal of Psychology*, *93*(3), 329–344. https://doi.org/10.1348/000712602760146242

Consalvo, M. (2003). Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games. In M. J. P. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader* (pp. 171–194). New York and London: Routledge. Retrieved from https://books.google.ca/books?id=SachbAN3OAkC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false

Department of Justice Canada. (2017). *Indigenous overrepresentation in the criminal justice system*. Retrieved from http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jf-pf/2017/jan02.html

Derby, J. (2014). Violent Video Games and the Military: Recruitment, Training, and Treating Mental Disability. *Art Education*, *67*(3), 19–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2014.11519269

Derby, J. (2016). Virtual realities: The use of violent video games in U.S. military recruitment and treatment of mental disability caused by war. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *36*(1). Retrieved from https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4704/4209

Derosa, K. (2014, August 27). Stigma of mental illness can lead to violence with police: report. *Times Colonist*. Retrieved from http://www.timescolonist.com/news/local/stigma-of-mental-illness-can-lead-to-violence-with-police-report-1.1332043

Devroe, E., & Terpstra, J. (2015). Plural Policing. *European Journal of Policing Studies*, *2*(3), 235–244.

Dietrich, D. R. (2013). Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters. *Sociological Inquiry*, *83*(1), 82–105. https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12001

Dorling, D., Gordon, D., Hillyard, P., Pantazis, C., Pemberton, S., & Tombs, S. (2008). *Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More Than Crime (2nd ed.)*. Retrieved from http://oro.open.ac.uk/36313/

Durnal, E. W. (2010). Crime scene investigation (as seen on TV). *Forensic Science International*, *199*(1–3), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forsciint.2010.02.015

Eddy, M. (2006). *War on Drugs: The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign*. Washington D.C. Retrieved from https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc807473/m1/1/

Eid, M., & Karim, K. H. (2014). *Re-imagining the other : culture, media, and western-Muslim intersections*. (M. Eid & K. H. Karim, Eds.). Palgrave MacMillan. Retrieved from https://books.google.ca/books?id=7ENvBAAAQBAJ&lr=&source=gbs_navlinks_s

ElminsterAU, Hlp, Zilav, & Sharlikran. (2012). TES5Edit. NexusMods. Retrieved from http://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/25859/?

Entertainment Software Rating Board. (n.d.). Frequently Asked Questions. Retrieved June 21, 2018, from http://www.esrb.org/ratings/faq.aspx#7

Eskelinen, M. (2001). The Gaming Situation. *Game Studies*, *1*(1). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/

Eskelinen, M. (2004). Towards Computer Game Studies. In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (p. 36). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Evans, S. B., & Janish, E. (2015). #INeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *2*(2), 125–150.

Everett, A., & Watkins, C. S. (2008). The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games. In K. Salen (Ed.), *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning* (pp. 141–166). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Famularo, J. (2016). “Skyrim” Changed RPGs Forever. Retrieved April 30, 2018, from https://www.inverse.com/article/22299-elder-scrolls-skyrim-influence-rpgs

Feng, J., Spence, I., & Pratt, J. (2007). Playing an Action Video Game Reduces Gender Differences in Spatial Cognition. *Psychological Science*, *18*(10), 850–855. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01990.x

Ferguson, C. J. (2010). Blazing Angels or Resident Evil? Can Violent Video Games Be a Force for Good? *Review of General Psychology*, *14*(2), 68–81. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018941

Ferguson, C. J. (2011). Video Games and Youth Violence: A Prospective Analysis in Adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *40*(4), 377–391.

Ferguson, C. J. (2015a). Do Angry Birds Make for Angry Children? A Meta-Analysis of Video Game Influences on Children's and Adolescents' Aggression, Mental Health, Prosocial Behavior, and Academic Performance. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *10*(5), 646–666. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615592234

Ferguson, C. J. (2015b). Does Media Violence Predict Societal Violence? It Depends on What You Look at and When. *Journal of Communication*, *65*(1), E1–E22. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12129

Ferguson, C. J. (2018). The problem of false positives and false negatives in violent video game experiments. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, *56*, 35–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJLP.2017.11.001

Ferguson, C. J., & Kilburn, J. (2009). The Public Health Risks of Media Violence: A Meta-Analytic Review. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, *154*(5), 759–763.

Ferguson, C. J., & Kilburn, J. (2010). Much ado about nothing: the misestimation and overinterpretation of violent video game effects in eastern and western nations: comment on Anderson et al. (2010). *Psychological Bulletin*, *136*(2), 174-178; discussion 182-187. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018566

Ferguson, C. J., Olson, C. K., Kutner, L. a., & Warner, D. E. (2014). Violent Video Games, Catharsis Seeking, Bullying, and Delinquency: A Multivariate Analysis of Effects. *Crime & Delinquency*, *60*(5), 764–784. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128710362201

Ferguson, C. J., Rueda, S. M., Cruz, a. M., Ferguson, D. E., Fritz, S., & Smith, S. M. (2008). Violent Video Games and Aggression: Causal Relationship or Byproduct of Family Violence and Intrinsic Violence Motivation? *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *35*(3), 311–332. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854807311719

Ferrell, J. (1999). Cultural Criminology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *25*, 395–418. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2007.00081_11.x

Ferrell, J., Hayward, K. J., & Young, J. (2015). *Cultural Criminology* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE. Retrieved from https://books.google.ca/books?id=BkIdCAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false

Ferrell, J., & Sanders, C. (1995). *Cultural criminology*. Northeastern University Press. Retrieved from https://books.google.ca/books/about/Cultural_Criminology.html?id=NnQx2_586TAC&redir_esc=y

Ferri, G. (2007). Narrating machines and interactive matrices: a semiotic common ground for game studies. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference: Situated Play* (pp. 466–473). Tokyo: Digital Games Research Association. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/narrating-machines-and-interactive-matrices-a-semiotic-common-ground-for-game-studies/

Frasca, G. (2003). Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2003 Conference: Level Up*. Utrecht: Digital Games Research Association. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/ludologists-love-stories-too-notes-from-a-debate-that-never-took-place/

Funk, J. B., Hagan, J., Schimming, J., Bullock, W. A., Buchman, D. D., & Myers, M. (2002). Aggression and Psychopathology in Adolescents with a Preference for Violent Electronic Games. *Aggressive Behavior*, *28*(2), 134–144. https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.90015

Gabbiadini, A., Riva, P., Andrighetto, L., Volpato, C., & Bushman, B. J. (2013). Interactive Effect of Moral Disengagement and Violent Video Games on Self-Control, Cheating, and Aggression. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *5*(4), 451–458. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550613509286

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, *6*(3), 167–191.

Gentile, D. (2009). Pathological Video-Game Use Among Youth Ages 8 to 18. *Psychological Science*, *20*(5), 594–602. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02340.x

Gentile, D. (2011). The Multiple Dimensions of Video Game Effects. *Child Development Perspectives*, *5*(2), 75–81. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00159.x

Gerome, M. (2014). The 6th in The Elder Scrolls Series: How to Blow Away Skyrim. Retrieved from http://www.thebitbag.com/the-6th-in-the-elder-scrolls-series-how-to-blow-away-skyrim/88282

Goldberg, H. (2011). *All Your Base Are Belong To Us: How Fifty Years of Videogames Conquered Pop Culture*. New York: Three Rivers.

Gopher. (2013). Let's Play Skyrim Again: Chapter 1. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/user/GophersVids

Green, C. S., & Bavelier, D. (2003). Action video game modifies visual selective attention. *Nature*, *423*(6939), 534–537. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature01647

Green, C. S., & Bavelier, D. (2007). Action-video-game experience alters the spatial resolution of vision. *Psychological Science*, *18*(1), 88–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01853.x

Greitemeyer, T., & Mügge, D. O. (2014). Video games do affect social outcomes: a meta-analytic review of the effects of violent and prosocial video game play. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, *40*, 578–589. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213520459

Greitemeyer, T., & Osswald, S. (2010). Effects of prosocial video games on prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *98*(2), 211–221. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016997

Griffiths, M. D., & Hunt, N. (1998). Dependence on Computer Games by Adolescents. *Psychological Reports*, *82*(2), 475–480. https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1998.82.2.475

Grooten, J., & Kowert, R. (2015). Going Beyond the Game: Development of Gamer Identities Within Societal Discourse and Virtual Spaces. *Loading: A Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, *9*(14), 70–87.

Gunn, F. (2015, March 4). Barry Cooper: Bill C-51 is rightly aimed at violent Islamic jihadi terrorists. *National Post*. Retrieved from https://nationalpost.com/opinion/barry-cooper-bill-c-51-is-rightly-aimed-at-violent-islamic-jihadi-terrorists

Gygax, G. (1978). *Advanced Dungons & Dragons Players Handbook* (1st ed.). TSR Games.

Gygax, G., & Arneson, D. (1974). Dungeons & Dragons. TSR, Inc.

Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis : mugging, the state, and law and order*. *Critical social studies* (First). London: The MacMillan Press Ltd. https://doi.org/10.2307/589668

Haninger, K., & Thompson, K. M. (2004). Content and ratings of teen-rated video games. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *291*(7), 856–865. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.291.7.856

Hart, C. (2017). Getting Into the Game: An Examination of Player Personality Projection in Videogame Avatars. *Game Studies*, *17*(2). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/hart

Hartmann, T. (2017). The “Moral Disengagement in Violent Videogames” Model. *Game Studies*, *17*(2). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/hartmann

Hayward, K. J. (2012). Cultural Criminology. In *Oxford Bibilographies*. Retrieved from http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396607/obo-9780195396607-0003.xml

Hayward, K. J., & Young, J. (2004). Cultural criminology: some notes on the script. *Theoretical Criminology*, *8*(3), 259–273. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480604044608

Helly, D. (2004). Are Muslims Discriminated Against in Canada Since September 2001? *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, *36*(1), 24–47. Retrieved from https://web-a-ebscohost-com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=58149ebc-d784-4474-8bf1-5f92721dcc32%40sessionmgr4009&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3D%3D#AN=14854370&db=aph

Helly, D. (2012). *Islamophobia in Canada? Women's Rights, Modernity, Secularism* (RECODE No. 11). Helsinki. Retrieved from http://www.recode.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Helly-Denise-2012-RECODE.pdf

Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2011). *The Practice of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Hilgard, J., Engelhardt, C. R., & Rouder, J. N. (2017). Overstated evidence for short-term effects of violent games on affect and behavior: A reanalysis of Anderson et al. (2010). *Psychological Bulletin*, *143*(7), 757–774. Retrieved from http://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2017-26558-001

Hillyard, P., & Tombs, S. (2008). Beyond Criminology. In D. Dorling, D. Gordon, P. Hillyard, C. Pantazis, S. Pemberton, & S. Tombs (Eds.), *Criminal Obsessions: Why Harm Matters More Than Crime* (2nd ed.). London: King's College Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. Retrieved from http://www.dannydorling.org/wp-content/files/dannydorling_publication_id1047.pdf

Hitchens, M. (2011). A Survey of First-person Shooters and their Avatars. *Game Studies*, *11*(3). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/michael_hitchens

Hobbes, T. (1651/1996). *Leviathan*. (R. Tuck, Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holstein, J., & Gubrium, J. (1995). *The Active Interview*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986120

Honneth, A. (1996). *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. MIT Press. Retrieved from http://books.google.ca/books/about/The_Struggle_for_Recognition.html?id=VgdFeCSlJcoC&pgis=1

Hoppe, T. (2017). *Punishing disease : HIV and the criminalization of sickness* (1st ed.). Oakland: University of Californa Press.

Jakobsson, M. (2006). Questing for Knowledge: Virtual Worlds as Dynamic Processes of Social Interaction. In R. Schroeder & A.-S. Axelsson (Eds.), *Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* (pp. 209–225). Dordrecht: Springer.

Janz, J., & Martis, R. G. (2003). The representation of gender and ethnicity in digital interactive games. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2003 Conference: Level Up*. Utrecht: Digital Games Research Association. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/the-representation-of-gender-and-ethnicity-in-digital-interactive-games/

Johnson, A. (2018). Former White Supremacist Leader Says Multiplayer Gaming is Used for Recruitment. Retrieved from http://www.gamerevolution.com/news/401799-former-white-supremacist-leader-multiplayer-gaming-recruitment

Jones, T., van Steden, R., & Boutellier, H. (2009). Pluralisation of policing in England & Wales and the Netherlands: exploring similarity and difference. *Policing and Society*, *19*(3), 282–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439460902871355

Journalist's Resource. (2014, August). Academic research and studies: How they work and why journalists should care. *Journalist's Resource*. Retrieved from https://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/research/introduction-studies-academic-research-journalists

Juul, J. (2001). Games Telling Stories? A brief note on games and narratives. *Game Studies*, *1*(1). Retrieved from gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/

Kane, A. (2017). Why We're Still Talking About "Skyrim." Retrieved April 30, 2018, from https://www.rollingstone.com/glixel/news/why-were-still-talking-about-skyrim-w475024

Kara, F. B. (2014). Police Interactions with the Mentally Ill: The Role of Procedural Justice. *Canadian Graduate Journal of Sociology and Criminology*, *3*(1), 79–94.

Kepes, S., Bushman, B. J., & Anderson, C. A. (2017). Violent video game effects remain a societal concern: Reply to Hilgard, Engelhardt, and Rouder (2017). *Psychological Bulletin*, *143*(7), 775–782. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000112

Konijn, E. a, Bijvank, M. N., & Bushman, B. J. (2007). I wish I were a warrior: the role of wishful identification in the effects of violent video games on aggression in adolescent boys. *Developmental Psychology*, *43*(4), 1038–1044. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.43.4.1038

Konzack, L. (2002). Computer Game Criticism: A Method for Computer Game Analysis. *Proceedings of the Computer Games and Digital Culture Conference Tampere, Finland*, 89–100.

Kooistra, P. (1990). Criminals as Heroes: Linking Symbol to Structure. *Symbolic Interaction*, *13*(2), 217–239. https://doi.org/1990.13.2.217

Kujanpää, T., Manninen, T., & Vallius, L. (2007). What's My Game Character Worth – The Value Components of MMOG Characters. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference: Situated Play* (pp. 327–334). Tokyo: Digital Games Research Association. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/whats-my-game-character-worth-the-value-components-of-mmog-characters/

Leonard, D. J. (2005). To the White Extreme: Conquering Athletic Space, White Manhood, and Racing Virtual Reality. In N. Garrelts (Ed.), *Digital Gameplay: Essays on the Nexus of Game and Gamer* (pp. 110–129). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc. Retrieved from https://books.google.ca/books?id=Woct9TuzNNoC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false

Mallea, P. (2014). *The war on drugs : a failed experiment*. Toronto: Dundurn.

Malliet, S. (2007). Adapting the Principles of Ludology to the Method of Video Game Content Analysis. *Game Studies*, *7*(1). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/malliet

Mill, J. S. (1873/2003). *Autobiography*. (M. D'Hooghe, Ed.). Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg. https://doi.org/10.2307/312895

Mill, J. S. (1859/2011). *On Liberty*. (C. Weyant, M. Pettit, & Online Distributed Proofreading Team, Eds.). Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg. Retrieved from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34901/34901-h/34901-h.htm

Mou, Y., & Peng, W. (2008). Gender and Racial Stereotypes in Popular Video Games. In R. E. Ferdig (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education* (pp. 922–937). Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.

Muncie, J. (1999). Decriminalising Criminology. *The British Criminology Conference: Liverpool, July 1999*, *3*(July 1999), 1–9. Retrieved from http://britsoccrim.org/volume3/010.pdf

Munday, D., & Chandler, R. (2011). *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Narvaez, D., Mattan, B., Macmichael, C., & Squillace, M. (2008). Kill Bandits, Collect Gold or Save the Dying: The Effects of Playing a Prosocial Video Game. *Media Psychology Review*, *1*.

Novak, K. J., & Chamlin, M. B. (2012). Racial Threat, Suspicion, and Police Behavior. *Crime & Delinquency*, *58*(2), 275–300. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128708322943

O'Reilly, C. (2015). The Pluralization of High Policing: Convergence and Divergence at the Public–Private Interface: *British Journal of Criminology*, *55*(4), 688–710. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu114

Oei, A. C., & Patterson, M. D. (2015). Enhancing perceptual and attentional skills requires common demands between the action video games and transfer tasks. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *6*(FEB), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00113

Okagaki, L., & Frensch, P. A. (1994). Effects of video game playing on measures of spatial performance: Gender effects in late adolescence. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *15*(1), 33–58. https://doi.org/10.1016/0193-3973(94)90005-1

Pearce, C. (2004). Towards a Game Theory of Game. In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (pp. 143–153). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Pontell, H. N., Black, W. K., & Geis, G. (2014). Too big to fail, too powerful to jail? On the absence of criminal prosecutions after the 2008 financial meltdown. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, *61*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-013-9476-4

Pooley, E. (1999, May 2). Portrait Of A Deadly Bond. *Time*, pp. 26–32. Retrieved from https://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,23916,00.html

Prot, S., Anderson, C. A., Gentile, D., Brown, S. C., & Swing, E. L. (2014). The positive and negative effects of video games. In A. Jordan & D. Romer (Eds.), *Media and the Well-Being of Children and Adolescents* (pp. 109–128). New York: Oxford University Press.

Reiman, J. H., & Leighton, P. (2013). *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class, and Criminal Justice* (10th ed.). New York: Routledge.

Reinarman, C., & Levine, H. G. (1989). Crack in Context: America's Latest Demon Drug. *Contemporary Drug Problems*, *16*, 535–578.

Reinarman, C., & Levine, H. G. (2004). Crack in the Rearview Mirror: Deconstructing Drug War Mythology. *Social Justice*, *31*(1–2), 182–199.

Revkin, A. C. (2011, September 19). Cosmic Breitbart Climate Blunder. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/cosmic-breitbart-climate-blunder/

Reyns, B. W., & Henson, B. (2010). Superhero justice: The depiction of crime and justice in modern-age comic books and graphic novels. *Sociology of Crime Law and Deviance*, *14*(April), 45–66. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1521-6136(2010)0000014006

Ribbens, W., & Malliet, S. (2015). How male young adults construe their playing style in violent video games. *New Media and Society*, *17*(10), 1624–1642. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814530821

Rideout, V., Foehr, U., & Roberts, D. (2010). Generation M2: Media in the lives of 8 to 18-year-olds. Menlo Park, California: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.kff.org/other/report/generation-m2-media-in-the-lives-of-8-to-18-year-olds/

Ryan, M.-L. (2001). Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media. *Game Studies*, *1*(1). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/

Salter, A., & Blodgett, B. (2017). *Toxic geek masculinity in media: Sexism, trolling, and identity policing*. *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66077-6

Sanders, C. R., & Lyon, E. (1995). Repetitive Retribution: Media Images and the Cultural Construction of Criminal Justice. In J. Ferrell & C. Sanders (Eds.), *Cultural Criminology* (pp. 25–44). Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Schulzke, M. (2009). Moral Decision Making in Fallout. *Game Studies*, *9*(2). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/schulzke

Sestir, M. A., & Bartholow, B. D. (2010). Violent and nonviolent video games produce opposing effects on aggressive and prosocial outcomes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *46*(6), 934–942. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.06.005

Shaw, A. (2009). Putting the Gay in Games. *Games and Culture*, *4*(3), 228–253. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009339729

Shaw, A. (2010a). *Identity, Identification, and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An audience reception study*. University of Pennsylvania.

Shaw, A. (2010b). What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies. *Games and Culture*, *5*(4), 403–424. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009360414

Shaw, A. (2012). Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity. *New Media and Society*, *14*(1), 28–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410394

Shaw, A. (2015). *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

SideWaysThinker. (2013). Lets Play TES Skyrim Thieves Guild! Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/user/SideWaysThinker

Sim, T., Gentile, D., Bricolo, F., Serpelloni, G., & Gulamoydeen, F. (2012). A Conceptual Review of Research on the Pathological Use of Computers, Video Games, and the Internet. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, *10*(5), 748–769. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-011-9369-7

Simons, J. (2007). Narrative, Games, and Theory. *Game Studies*, *7*(1). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/simons

Statista. (2017). Genre breakdown of video game sales in the United States in 2016. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/189592/breakdown-of-us-video-game-sales-2009-by-genre/

Suellentrop, C. (2016, November 21). 'Skyrim' Creator on Why We'll Have to Wait for Another 'Elder Scrolls.' *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/skyrim-creator-on-why-well-have-to-wait-for-another-elder-scrolls-128377/

Taylor, T. L. (2002). Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds. In R. Schroeder (Ed.), *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* (pp. 40–62). London: Springer-Verlag. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4471-0277-9_3

Todd, C. (2015). Commentary: GamerGate and resistance to the diversification of gaming culture. *Women's Studies Journal*, *29*(1), 64–67.

Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse. (2015). *Federal White Collar Crime Prosecutions At 20-Year Low*. Syracuse. Retrieved from http://trac.syr.edu/tracreports/crim/398/

Tychsen, A., McIlwain, D., Brolund, T., & Hitchens, M. (2007). Player-Character Dynamics in Multi-Player Role Playing Games. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference: Situated Play* (pp. 40–48). Tokyo: Digital Games Research Association. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/player-character-dynamics-in-multi-player-role-playing-games/

United States Department of Defense. (2015). *2015 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community*. Retrieved from http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2015-Demographics-Report.pdf

Various Authors. (n.d.). UESPWiki. Retrieved from http://uesp.net/

Vârtosu, C. (2014). Realization Manager, Ubisoft România. Bucharest.

Vella, D. (2014a). Modeling the Semiotic Structure of Game Characters. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2014 Conference: <Verb that ends in 'ing'> the <noun> of Game <plural noun>*. Snowbird, UT: Digital Games Research Association. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/modeling-the-semiotic-structure-of-game-characters/

Vella, D. (2014b). Player and Figure: An Analysis of a Scene in Kentucky Route Zero. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2014 Conference: <Verb That Ends in 'Ing'> the <noun> of Game <plural Noun>*, 2–21. Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/player-and-figure-an-analysis-of-a-scene-in-kentucky-route-zero/

Walker, J., & Mcdonald, D. (1995). The Over-Representation of Indigenous People in Custody in Australia. *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, (47).

Walker, R. H. (2000). *Testimony Concerning The Involvement of Organized Crime on Wall Street*. U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

Weber, M. (1968). *Politics as a Vocation*. (H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, Eds.). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Welch, K. (2007). Black Criminal Stereotypes and Racial Profiling. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *23*(3), 276–288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986207306870

Welch, K. (2016). Middle Eastern Terrorist Stereotypes and Anti-Terror Policy Support. *Race and Justice*, *6*(2), 117–145. https://doi.org/10.1177/2153368715590478

Wesp, E. (2014). A Too-Coherent World: Game Studies and the Myth of "Narrative" Media. *Game Studies*, *14*(2). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/wesp

Westecott, E. (2009). The Player Character as Performing Object. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009 Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*. London: Digital Games Research Association. https://doi.org/10.1.1.190.1797

Wihbey, J. (2011, September). Research chat: Andrew Revkin on covering and using scholarship. *Journalist's Resource*. Retrieved from https://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/research/research-chat-andrew-revkin-covering-scholarship

Wijman, T. (2018). Mobile Revenues Account for More Than 50% of the Global Games Market as It Reaches $137.9 Billion in 2018. Retrieved June 25, 2018, from https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/global-games-market-reaches-137-9-billion-in-2018-mobile-games-take-half/

Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2018). Islamophobia in Canada: Measuring the Realities of Negative Attitudes Toward Muslims and Religious Discrimination. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie*, *55*(1), 86–110. https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12180

Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. D. (2009). The virtual census: Representations of gender, race and age in video games. *New Media and Society*, *11*(5), 815–834. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809105354

Williams, J. (1994). Comics: A tool of subversion? *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, *2*(6), 129–146. Retrieved from https://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol2is6/comics.html

Wittek, C. T., Finserås, T. R., Pallesen, S., Mentzoni, R. A., Hanss, D., Griffiths, M. D., & Molde, H. (2016). Prevalence and Predictors of Video Game Addiction: A Study Based on a National Representative Sample of Gamers. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, *14*(5), 672–686. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-015-9592-8

Yar, M. (2012). Critical criminology, critical theory and social harm. In S. Hall & S. Winlow (Eds.), *New Directions in Criminological Theory*. Abingdon, Oxon, GBR: Routledge.

Yee, N. (2006a). The demographics, motivations, and derived experiences of users of massively multi-user online graphical environments. *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, *15*(3), 309–329. https://doi.org/10.1162/pres.15.3.309

Yee, N. (2006b). The Psychology of Massively Multi-User Online Role-Playing Games. In R. Schroeder & A.-S. Axelsson (Eds.), *Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* (pp. 187–207). Dordrecht: Springer.

Zehr, H. (2005). *Changing Lenses: A new focus for crime and justice* (3rd ed.). Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

Zinger, I. (2017). *Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2016-2017*. Ottawa. Retrieved from http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/annrpt/annrpt20162017-eng.aspx

Appendix A.

Informed Consent Document

Information Sheet: Making Meaning out of Social Harm in Videogames

Who is conducting this study?

Principal Investigator: Aidan Fortier, School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University

(Email: afortier@sfu.ca)

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Bryan Kinney, School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University (Email: bkinney@sfu.ca)

This study is being conducted in partial completion of the Principal Investigator's M.A. Thesis.

Why are we doing this study?

This study aims to understand how people think about and react to videogame content related to crime, justice, and moral decisions. We are inviting people like you, who have experience playing these sorts of games, to help us.

Your participation is voluntary

You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you can still choose to withdraw at any time, without giving reasons, and with no negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all data collected about you during your enrolment in the study will be destroyed.

What happens in the study?

If you would like to participate, we will arrange an interview, lasting about one hour. If possible, this will take place in person, at a location of your choosing. Otherwise, we can arrange for the interview to happen over Skype or your preferred internet video chat.

If we conduct the interview via internet video chat, we will use a secure network and an encrypted channel to preserve your confidentiality. However, please be aware that these safeguards may not be perfect, and there is still a small chance that your data will be intercepted. That said, the topic of these interviews is not expected to reveal any sensitive information, so the risks associated with interception are minimal.

Before we begin the interview, you will be asked if you are comfortable being audio-recorded. If you do not agree to be recorded, but would still like to participate in the study, the Principal Investigator will take notes during the interview instead of using an audio-recorder. If you do agree to be recorded, the recordings will be stored securely on an encrypted drive, accessed only by the Principal Investigator, and deleted once they are transcribed, to preserve your confidentiality.

During the interview, you will be asked about your experiences playing videogames. The questions will focus on how you think about and react to game content related to crime, justice, and moral decisions.

Are there any risks involved in this study?

As mentioned, if we communicate over the internet, there is a small chance that our communications will be intercepted. However, we will use secure networks and encrypted channels to reduce this risk as much as possible. Additionally, our communications are not expected to reveal any sensitive information, so the risks associated with interception are minimal.

There are no other foreseeable risks to you in participating in this study. If you have any other questions or concerns, please let the Principal Investigator know.

Are there any benefits involved with this study?

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. Past participants have mentioned enjoying the opportunity to talk about videogames, and have reported increased self-awareness about their in-game behaviours and decisions, but this is a highly subjective potential benefit.

What kinds of measures are in place to maintain confidentiality?

Your privacy is important to us. Information that discloses your identity will not be released without your consent unless required by law. The low-risk nature of our interviews makes this very unlikely.

Any identifying information will be redacted from your data records. To protect your identity, you may choose a pseudonym, or one will be chosen for you by the Principal Investigator. Any digital data collected will be stored securely, on an encrypted external hard drive, which will be kept under lock and key when not in use. Any paper data collected will likewise be stored under lock and key. If we communicate via the internet, we will do so over a secure network and an encrypted channel. If you agree to be audio-recorded for your interview, the audio files will be kept only until they can be transcribed, and afterwards destroyed to prevent voice recognition. All of your data will be accessed only by the Principal Investigator.

Future contact of participants

We may need to contact you for a follow-up interview, or for clarification on any points discussed in the initial interview. However, we will never contact you without your consent, and we will keep all contact information and communications confidential.

How will the results from this study be disseminated?

The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis, and may also be published in academic journals. If you are interested in reading the results of this study either before or after publication, please let the Principal Investigator know.

To whom can you address complaints or concerns about this study?

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact Principal Investigator Aidan Fortier (afortier@sfu.ca) or their Faculty Supervisor Bryan Kinney (bkinney@sfu.ca).

Future use of participant data

The data collected during this study is expected to be used only for the purposes of the Principal Investigator's M.A. Thesis and journal publications. However, in the event that

the results need to be used for some other purpose, such as research materials, educational purposes, or grant applications, your confidentiality will still be preserved, and identifying details will not be released without your consent. With your consent, your data will be stored for a period of up to seven years (until 2024).

Appendix B.

Recruitment Poster

SFU SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
ENGAGING THE WORLD

Are you a gamer?

Do you want to talk about videogames

FOR SCIENCE?

Making Meaning out of Social Harm in Videogames

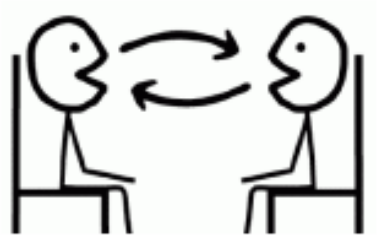
This study uses interviews to explore how players perceive, interpret, and respond to videogame content relating to social harm. Participation is voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential in all reports.

You:

- Aged 19+
- Have experience playing videogames
- Available for Skype or in-person interview lasting around one hour

Me:

- M.A. student at Simon Fraser University
- Conducting this study for my Master's thesis



For more information about the study, or to decide if you want to participate, please contact Aidan Fortier at [redacted].

Study #: 2016s0086 Version: 2017 May 23 Page 1 of 1

Appendix C.

Interview Schedule

Demographics

- Introduce yourself. What sort of information about yourself would you like to share? (suggest things like age, gender, race/ethnicity, education/employment)

Gaming

- Tell me about the games you enjoy playing
- What do you like about them?
- What is a typical gaming experience for you?
- What are some of the most important aspects of a game to you?
- Do you ever use mods in your games?
- If so, what kind of mods do you tend to choose, and why?

Identity

- How important is character creation to you?
- Does it affect how you play the game? If so, how?
- What influences the choices you make during character creation/customization?
- To what extent do you view your character as an extension of yourself?
- Do you ever roleplay as an entirely different persona?
- If so, how do you create this persona?
- What do you enjoy about your preferred playstyle?
- What makes your character who they are?
- What is it like to play as a pre-set character?
- How does this experience vary across different games/characters/personas?

- If you play with other people, does that influence your character creation decisions?

Construction of meaning

- How do you know what the laws or morals of the game world are?
- How well do those laws/morals tend to match up with your own real-world moral beliefs?
- How do you reconcile mismatches between in-game laws and morals and your own moral beliefs?
- When playing a game, how do you know what kind of NPC someone is? (e.g. 'good guys', 'bad guys', neutral/background, allies, opponents)
- What sorts of ideas or information help you make these determinations about NPC types?
- In games with a combat component, how do you know which situations require or encourage violence, and which do not?
- Based on your understanding of this, how do you tend to respond to different sorts of situations that might require combat?
- How does this vary across different games/characters/personas?
- Based on your preferred play style in your favourite games, how do you tend to respond to different kinds of NPCs? (e.g. law enforcement/police/guards, 'good'/hero type NPCs, criminal/evil NPCs, neutral/background NPCs)
- How does this vary across different games/characters/personas?
- What sorts of ideas or information help you make these decisions?
- If you play with other people, does that influence how you understand/interpret/respond to in-game laws and morals, or NPC alignments?

Moral decisions

- What do you do when presented with the opportunity to take on a certain moral alignment?
- Do you prefer to roleplay a character with a certain moral alignment, or do you just play as yourself?
- (If applicable) What sort of moral alignment do you most enjoy playing? What influences your decision to play as a character with that moral alignment?

- How do you respond to specific opportunities to make criminal or moral decisions?
- What influences your moral decision-making process?
- If you play with other people, does that influence the kind of moral decisions your character makes?