Society Doesn't Owe You Anything: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* & Video Games as Speculative Fiction

Marc A. Ouellette
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, Virginia, USA
mouellet@odu.edu

ABSTRACT

Since Donald Trump's election in 2016, popular and scholarly commentators have been looking for speculative and/or dystopic literary works that might provide analogues for the Trump-era. Perhaps the most famous of these was the renewed popularity of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this regard, though, video games remain an underexplored fictional form. With its exaggerated and parodic satire of an America ruled by the corruption and greed of extreme right-wing populism, *Grand Theft Auto (GTA): San Andreas* (2004) offers a speculative fiction that players can enact as well as imagine, and simulate as well as prepare. Thus, reading the game through the lens of speculative fiction shows that *GTA: San Andreas* offers the kinds of intertexts, allusions, and parallels that Brabazon, Redhead, and Chivaura (2018) argue is essential for making sense of a dystopic present.

Keywords: video games, game studies, popular culture, speculative fiction

I turn on the car radio and hear Mike Andrews proclaim ""Society Doesn't Owe You Anything"," a line from his motivational talk tour that will be coming to an arena near me. Mike ends the ad with "Are you saying this isn't the greatest country in the world?" Since I'm not interested, I switch channels in time to hear a Public Service Announcement for a group that intends to ban green cards because "the lines are longer at the food store" and there are "19 million illegal immigrants" in the state already.[1] My phone rings and a government agent tells me "This history it's all lies." Instead of starting the mission that ensues, I add these to the growing list of ways *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the highly influential and best-selling video game of 2004 (Webb 2019) is not only a dystopic fiction, but its game world, its story, its characters, and its in-game cultural productions can be read quite easily as a speculative fiction anticipating the rise of right-wing populism in the United States, culminating in the presidency of Donald Trump. While speculative fiction is interactive because it requires imaginative participation, a game allows players to enact it, as well. This crucial aspect of games adds to the level of engagement Gill (2013) cites as a necessary and vital part of any piece of speculative fiction. Like all of the games in the series, *GTA: San Andreas* presents an exaggerated America in which greed and corruption are the rule. Like all of the games in the series, it is an action-adventure that combines elements of role-playing, driving, and third-person action in addition to the games' infamous eponymous task. However, *GTA: San Andreas* represents an inflection point in the series in terms of the vastness of the gameworld, the intertexts and allusions to American popular culture, and the detail of both. Read as a speculative fiction, then, the game offers a means of rehearsing, practicing, and preparing for the eventuality of a dystopic reality. Not only are there anti-immigrant screeds, the game also includes Russia owning the president and deep racial divisions in its course. Indeed, the comment, "Society does not owe you anything" was also stated directly and unproblematically by a guest on a segment of the right-wing talk show, *Fox and Friends*, in a segment detailing the evils of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood and its host, the highly acclaimed and beloved Fred Rogers, to its audience (Mikkelson 2019).[2]

Despite its title, in *Trump Studies*, Australian academics Brabazon, Redhead, and Chivaura (2018, p. 2) acknowledge that the presidency of a reality TV caps the rapid rise of right-wing extremism in the early twenty-first century. Thus, they cite the need for consumers to refer to previous iterations of speculative dystopic fiction as a means of making sense of a "dystopic present." They cite the rise of popularity of Orwell's *1984* (1949), Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), and of course Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Intriguingly, as Atwood was preparing to release a sequel, Classics scholar Michael Zimm (2019, August 13) proclaimed that video games were finally worthy of study alongside historical texts like the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. Conversely, as far back as 2006, Blythe and Wright were discussing the potential of "pastiche scenarios," their name for portions of games that imitate novel narrative, to allow players to imagine futures (p. 1139). However, as I argue elsewhere, the *Grand Theft Auto* games are pastiches not only in sections but in scope as well (Ouellette 2010). Likewise, since Trump's election in 2016, popular and scholarly commentators have confined themselves to seeking (only) literary works for analogues to the Trump-era. For example, in looking at contemporary political attitudes and dystopian fiction, Jones and Paris (2018) get as far as looking at *The Hunger Games*, but not video games. Game scholars like Wills (2018) in *Gamer Nation*, a study of games and nationalism, Pérez-Latorre, et al. (2018), in their work on video games and the "social imaginary" of the great recession, and of course my own work on *GTA IV* (Ouellette 2010, 2011), limit themselves to contemporary games commenting on contemporaneous dystopian realities of the post-9/11 and Trump eras, respectively.

While video games are not at all underexplored as dystopic works, they have not as yet been considered in terms of their speculative visions of a dystopian future. Like Atwood's novel, *GTA: San Andreas* reveals a nation of corruption, divisions, sexism, and rank profiteering. Unlike Atwood's tale, however, players enact and participate in the rebuttal. Taking Brabazon, Redhead, and Chivaura (2018) one step further, then, speculative fictional games let players simulate the dystopic present and prepare for it, combining a key function of each

form simultaneously. Thus, I begin by considering *GTA: San Andreas* as a dystopian speculative fiction whose combination of game elements, narrative, and gameworld offer a plausible depiction of an America beset by greed, corruption, and right-wing extremism. As a corollary, my paper offers a means of demonstrating that video games, current and past, are a substantial—$43.8 billion worth in 2018 (Sanmarti 2019)—part of the present and the future of literature. Indeed, the fact that games allow players to participate in these outcomes makes them a powerful literary form to add to the roster of speculative dystopic fiction.

HAS IT ALWAYS BEEN LIKE THIS? GAMES AND SPECULATIVE FICTION

Typically, speculative fiction has been taken to include both the stereotypical and presumptive varieties of science fiction and fantasy. That is to say, it is a fiction that focuses on the technology or a fiction based more on social, political and cultural commentaries. However, scholars are increasingly recognizing that speculative fiction entails more of a "hybrid blend of generic features" (Cuder-Dominguez 2008, p. 177). *Grand Theft: Auto San Andreas* more than fits the bill. It combines the features of multiple game genres–racing, shooter, adventure, etc.—and multiple games—both mini-games like doing target shooting, and in-built versions of actual games like *Gyruss*. Moreover, as I write elsewhere (Ouellette 2010), the *Grand Theft Auto* games revolve around an elaborate satire of a particular era and include elements borrowed from popular movies like *Bullitt* and (the original) *The Italian Job*; i.e., those with car chases and big heists.[3] Citing himself, Nick Bowman (2016, p. 31) explains that while "these games were not meant to satire popular gangster films [. . .] their content is decidedly dark, from the theft of vehicles to get from one mission to the next to the murder of rival crime bosses, police officers, and innocent bystanders who might interfere with the player's objectives." Since he is writing about moral panics, Bowman understandably omits a couple of key points that are easily overlooked when discussing *Grand Theft Auto*: it does actually have rather benevolent routines including firefighter and paramedic, and more importantly there has to be some truth for any satire to function as a social commentary. While the latter could or should be an entry point to a consideration of video games as speculative fiction, it remains unexplored.

Indeed, the extended satire actually reveals the ways in which video games share the characteristics in form and content, as well as in reception and perception, with speculative fiction. This occurs in several ways. For example, Marcus Schulzke (2013, pp. 264-265) as his title suggests, looks at games as what he calls "speculative history" because "historical simulation video games are perfectly suited for capturing history as a lived experience, they immerse players in detailed complex worlds that players can personally explore and interact with." In this regard, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and its successors offer a portrait of the United States of America at various points in its history. The games' indexical grounding gives clues to its era through the music, the cars, the clothes, and the technology. Thus, the player can guess an approximate era and, if not the complete lived experience, can be immersed in the popular culture and therefore the politics of the period. The latter has two pair of interesting effects. As Belén Martin-Lucas (2014, p. 85) concludes, the fiction can be a worst-case scenario and still be plausible given the limits of the available extrapolation. The second part of the pairing stems from the source of concern for Martin-Lucas. She writes of speculative fiction and the "Glocal City", where "glocal" is a neologism of global and local. In other words, the analysis entails the sociological and political insights to be gleaned from the revelatory nature of speculative fiction and its spatio-temporal location. Indeed, as I will show, *GTA: San Andreas* involves precisely this sort of focus, through setting themes, characterizations, and playing with them. The spatio-temporal location, an imagined recent America, with parodic satires of Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and San Francisco providing the locales and the intertexts, becomes crucial to the framing of the game and to understanding its governing rule structure.

---

3   My earlier article considers the sources of the satire in a depth that is beyond the scope of the present piece.

To put it simply, there are no rules and corruption reigns.

As well, political scientist Craig Hayden (2017) considers the combination of immersion, decision making, and critical commentary as a tool for teaching and learning in International Relations. Games then offer "an analytical perspective to unpack the relationship of ideological articulation within rule systems that encode political rhetoric in video games, games that rely on the tropes of speculative fiction" (p. 175). Algorithms predict as much as they interpret. They condition operations but also predict outcomes.[4] However, Hayden's approach also points to another of the tendencies of scholars when considering games and their relationship with speculative fiction. They put games alongside speculative fiction, or they assert that games borrow from speculative fiction, not that games *are* speculative fiction. For example, no less a critic than Ian Bogost (2008) whose own "procedural rhetoric" plays a part in Hayden's method, offers that speculative practices include "literature that speculates about possible worlds that are unlike our own, but in a way that remains coupled to the actual world more than the term 'science fiction' might allow. Speculative fiction is fantastic, yet somehow grounded" (pp. 30-31). For Bogost, the grounding occurs because there is a material analogue in speculative fiction. He cannot, then, envision a procedure for facilitating such a grounding in a video game.[5]

That said, Mark Salter (2011), also taking a cue from Bogost, places games alongside speculative fiction first as a means of justifying their study, but also for considering the geopolitical potential of games, Salter writes, "Games are just as important, widespread, consumed and telling as speculative fiction, such as *Harry Potter* books or *Star Trek*. Games, as artifacts of culture, are more than simply mirrors of dominant ideologies or sites of sly resistance; they are also technologies of the self–particularly indicators of the ideals and limits of socially acceptable geopolitical behaviour" (p. 359). Importantly, though, Salter alludes to the fact that a text can have multiple and simultaneous valid readings. Even so, this is somewhat undercut by the sense of needing to justify the study of games by placing them alongside an equally disparaged form. As Martin-Lucas (2014) observes, "Despite its relegated position within academia–due to elitist bias within which the discipline of Literary Theory has regularly looked at what is generally called 'popular fiction'–speculative fiction is a major influence in contemporary culture" (p. 85). Likewise, video games are increasingly important cultural texts and cultural artefacts that continue to receive the approbation of some academics.

Moreover, as McAllister, et al. (2016) highlight, the *Grand Theft Auto* series has been a target of negative criticism from both popular and academic sources as too low-brow, too graphic in its depictions, and too reliant on violence and stereotypes *but* more significantly, these responses have conditioned and mediated fan responses and responses from Rockstar Games itself in subsequent releases.[6] Further, as I highlight elsewhere (Ouellette 2010), if one takes Baudrillard at his word, *Grand Theft Auto* portrays a hyperreal America. As Martin-Lucas (2014) notes of speculative fiction, "In recent years this genre has often been considered a most apt mode for narratizing the present times of ultra-rapid changes in science and technology as well

4   In case it is not intuitively obvious, algorithms serve a predictive function in a variety of games. In *Forza Horizon 4*, a racing simulator, an algorithm predicts collisions. For a first-person shooter like *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, an algorithm offers the odds of mission success. Sports simulators predict player performance. That said, it could be argued that a simple routine like the on-screen projectile in the original *Space War* game involves predicting the trajectory and the likelihood of contact.

5   Intriguingly, Jess Morrissette (2020) notes that the omnipresence of vending machines in a wide range of video games provide an important semiotic grounding in (a) reality. Here, it is worth noting that *GTA: San Andreas* has its share of vending machines for Sprunk, an energy replenishing drink, and a host of billboards, radio ads, and store locations for parodic versions of well-known brands.

6   In other words, as much as it might be tempting to draw conclusions based on a media effects approach, even for a game like *GTA*, the responses of fans and developers are more complex than any one reading might encompass. Moreover, in a very detailed series of tweets from an important scholar, Bonnie (Bo) Ruberg (6 Aug. 2019) notes with caution that "more & more, reviewers are instructing feminist, queer, & POC game scholars to tie their work explicitly & extensively to a certain ongoing, large-scale, game-related harassment campaign." While perhaps well-intentioned, as Ruberg notes these reactionary calls tend to come from scholars outside games and/or outside gender studies and can have significant unintended negative consequences for the writer.

as social structuring (p. 85). Here it is worth noting that this function of speculative fiction maps onto the first of Frasca's (2003, p. 232) four levels of simulation, namely the one "simulation shares with narrative and deals with representation and events. This includes the characteristics of objects and characters, backgrounds, setting and cut scenes." In Urbanski's (2015) words, speculative fiction becomes particularly useful in its ability to offer social critique because it "shows us our nightmares and therefore contributes to our efforts to avoid them" (p. 1). Put simply, the institutionalized right-wing extremism became the stuff of nightmares during Trump's presidency—at least to a "legal alien" who holds an H1B Visa—and almost willfully so. Writing not of speculative fiction but of the speculative economy that drives and is driven by the increases in global digitization, Nick Dyer-Witheford (2010) writes: "Economic crisis is colliding with climate chaos, ecological exhaustion, energy depletion and emergent challenges to a fiscally bankrupt but militarily dominant imperial hegemony. To foresee cataclysmic instabilities ahead is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but a historically-informed extrapolation from current tendencies" (p. 499). From the rise of reactionary religious zealotry and right-wing politics, to the dehumanization, degradation and deportation of immigrants to vast police corruption, Russian operatives, glibness about school shootings, groundless fear of socialism, and rampant racism, all effected through a ruling ethic of greed and corruption, *Grand Theft Auto* is as predictive as it is demonstrative.

SPECULATION AND SIMULATION: PLAYING *GTA: SAN ANDREAS*

Intriguingly, it is scholars in other fields–history, and political science–who are considering the predictive and speculative tendencies of video games. For example, Marcal Sanmarti (2019) highlights the ways games can become political tools through rampant gamification: "Seeing how videogames are turning into such a powerful way to tell stories and to engage the masses, we can also wonder if videogames have become mass media already. Would the political world miss the chance to use such a powerful tool to control the narrative?" (p. 9). In other words, games become another form of social media for political operatives to manipulate through messaging or to use as analogues when promoting a particular candidate or policy. Such a game, then, offers an opportunity to speculate and to rehearse the material. I would argue that *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* offers a first step in the process and it does so in and through moments when story maps onto play and vice versa, not the least of which is the set of in-game political advertisements. The principle means of delivering the key material, however, remains the radio. However, signs and billboards, place names, characters and storylines offer other means which occasion the game's eerily prophetic version of American dystopia, one which proclaims, "It's only a small step from mass transit to communism." For the remainder of the paper, I will consider primarily the elements of the game that shape and construct the gameworld and its ruling ethic of greed and corruption.

The combination of play and story seems to confirm and complement if not partly contradict Aarseth's (2004) comments about games and their intertexts. In fact, at certain moments the game becomes its own intertext through the pastiche that gives shape to its speculative satire. For example, even though the game is set in the early 1990s and was released in the early "noughties," its anticipation of right-wing media rings true.[7] The in-game radio station, WCTR and its host Lazlow, who plays a version of himself, has more affinity with Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, and Bill O'Reilly. Like Limbaugh, the in-game Lazlow, who goes by one name in real life and in the game, admits to being a recovering addict and having narrow worldviews. Like O'Reilly, he is misogynistic, racist, and harasses women. The program, *Entertaining America*, features an interview with a would-be gangster rapper, O-G Loc, who is eager to cozy up to the right-wing politicians. Prior to Lazlow's interview with the rapper, the station announcer refers to the program, *Entertaining America*, which had just taken a glib look at school shootings and announces, "That was *Entertaining America*, showing why

---

7   While the game studio that produces *GTA* games is based in the UK, the writers and the primary audience are American.

America is so respected [. . .] across the world." While the game mocks America, and the myth that it is held in high regard worldwide, the mockery Laslow invokes echoes Trump's frequent insistence that he would make America great again and that under him America is respected again. Yet Trump makes headlines for the fact that world leaders openly mock him, as they did during NATO meetings in December 2019 (Lyons & Wintour, 2019, December 4). As much as the player can turn off the radio at any time and isn't always in a vehicle, the player also learns very quickly that there are clues and information to be had by listening to the radio, but also echoes of the game's primary themes of institutionalized corruption. Though not directly part of the game, these still foster the construction of the game world and the experience of it. Lazlow admits at one point, "So, the media. You may hate us, but I gotta tell you, we hate ourselves more. And stop accusing us of being liberal! What a load of crap! This station is owned by AmmuNation! I mean, have you ever heard anyone complain about guns on this station? Hosts are getting shot all the time, but it gets glossed over."

Within my first three years in the U.S.A., journalists had been massacred at the *Capital Gazette* in Maryland (Bui, et al 2019), threatening packages had been sent to *CNN* (Wagner, M. et al., 2018, November 5), a plot to start a race war by shooting up Richmond, VA (Williams, et al 2020), and of course Trump tacitly agreed to the murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi, called the press "the enemy of the people," and cheered on a politician who assaulted a journalist, lied about it, and was convicted for it ((Roig-Franzia and Ellison 2020). This is significant because as in *Grand Theft Auto*, nothing has curbed the corruption. The recent election of at least U.S. representatives–whom I will not name—who believe and spread wild conspiracy theories—which I will not name—confirms that the movement continues. The lesson of *GTA: San Andreas* is that the only option remaining is to beat the corrupt figures at their own game.

The *Fox News* parallels hold in and through other guests and advertisements. A religious cult-leader who has resonances with Jordan Peterson is a subsequent guest with Lazlow. The creator of "Epsilonism" wants men to be more like hunter-gatherers, eat meat, and compares human behaviour to that of a sponge in order to release the "scared little boy beneath." For his part, Peterson adopts lobsters as a model, a beef-only diet, and blames feminism (Grainger 2018). WCTR News also offers a warning from gun manufacturers "Arm yourself or die." In fact, NRA propaganda ramped up significantly during Obama's administration with constant warnings that the Democrats were going to seize people's guns (Haltiwanger 2019). However, with the NRA's involvement with Russian gangsters and operatives during the Trump campaign (Orden 2020), an allegedly Second Amendment friendly regime has actually led to greater amounts of "arm yourself" rhetoric, including threats of civil war and demonstrations like those in Richmond and in the Kentucky capitol (Frankfort), with men in paramilitary gear flooding the legislative gallery, a move repeated on a national scale on 6 Jan. 2021 (Wade 2020). The only difference in *Grand Theft Auto's* version of Fox News is its admission. WCTR's motto is a straightforward "we distort, you can't retort," "state controlled media," and "reporting what the memo tells us to." These would-be exaggerations, if we take the game as a satire, but as a speculative text, it anticipates the Trump era lyric of Fox and Sinclair media operations. While it might be a response to the infamous post 9/11 memos from Clear Channel about songs and from MPIAA boss Jack Valente insisting that the entertainment industry should produce overly jingoistic material (Dixon 2004), the exaggeration for emphasis situates the text within a specific era. This relates especially to the available decisions and to the limits of the game world. Trump frequently threatened to suspend the broadcast licenses of media outlets that criticize him and has demanded that his response to the corona virus outbreak be "appreciated" by one and all (Roig-Franzia and Ellison 2020). The exaggerated warning in *GTA: San Andreas*, then, highlights the available intertexts that occur through playing, enacting, and witnessing the dystopian logic of the *Grand Theft Auto* world. Moreover, it presents a version of reality in which all of the normal stops on government corruption have failed. This makes the seemingly unethical acts the game entails much more plausible and indeed attractive to the player.

The speculative fictional world also includes mention of a government with anti-environmental

policies and featuring "senators [who] are burning your constitution." In one advert, the politicians promise to "wage war on nature, so you don't have to." Alas, the dystopian vision has become prophetic, as evidenced by the adverts that appear throughout the game and by the very same language being used to describe Mitch McConnell's tactics in the U.S. Senate (Reich 2019). Some of the in-game comments echo the American glibness about school shootings, years before Sandy Hook and Parkland. Adverts for Executive Intruder Extermination Services—a kind of predecessor of Blackwater—warns that "children will be equipped with bulletproof vests, and, depending on if they attend public schools, stun guns, and mace." That said, the service also promises to protect families "from the evils of a liberal society," and do it "the Patriotic way; that is, with overwhelming firepower." Here, I would remind readers of Trump's pivot following the mass shooting in El Paso, TX, in 2019, to blame video games as the root cause of the shooter's motive in order to distract white, suburban voters, and especially women to distract them from the impact of Trump's racist agenda (Picchi 2019). *Grand Theft Auto*, through its "Degenetron" adverts both mocks and necessarily anticipates right-wing and/or reactionary backlash against games.

Since the release of *Grand Theft Auto III*, the makers have planned for and tried to incite a backlash against the game. Rockstar Games went to the trouble of hiring one of Britain's most notorious spin-doctors, Max Clifford, to ensure an aggrieved public (Kohler 2012). Thus, at least some authorial intent can actually be inferred or surmised in terms of the game's predictive, speculative fiction. If anything, Rockstar and Clifford more than did the job, for they created a plausible speculative fiction of an America that is paralyzed by its intractable contradictions, all of which stem from the stated belief in life, liberty and freedom, a state sanctioned distrust of the state itself, and the resultant competition over who or what is more American than the rest. Clifford's past and present function has only one purpose: increase the bottom line. This calls into question any purported subversion that the game might offer (Ouellette 2010). Moreover, unfettered capitalism can only be impeded by democratic society, as Trump advisor, Peter Thiel, one of the founders of PayPal has asserted multiply in print (Tarnoff 2016). As one in game advert explains "[Announcer] Nobody offers you more gaming value, and you'll teach the kids some important life lessons about *real* capitalism. [child] 'Dad, I lost all my money.'" Thus, it is not surprising to hear adverts for anti-environment companies or for the in-game version of Chik-filA which admits,

> Cockle-doodle doo, we're a huge corporation
> Cockle-doodle doo, and we can't be stopped
> All of your protestors can go to hell
> It's time for Clucking Bell

Here, I would add that Trump's first EPA boss, Scott Pruitt was using agency resources to set up a Chik-fil-A franchise network for his wife, that is, when he wasn't busily promoting the destruction of several natural monuments, national parks, and wildlife refuges (Tatum 2018).

Perhaps no character embodies this more than *Grand Theft Auto*'s celebrity turned right-wing demagogue, Mike Andrews. Like Trump, Andrews holds noxious rallies proclaiming, "Rags are Riches." Like Trump, Andrews is a shameless nationalist who proclaims, "Society doesn't owe you anything! The government has better things to worry about. Like killing innocent people." Crowds chant the now familiar "U-S-A, U-S-A" during his rallies, in which he says, "Instead of complaining about being poor [. . .] enjoy it." When a woman replies that she cannot afford her rent, Andrews immediately goes to "Whoa, bitch! Settle it down! Are you saying this ain't the greatest country in the world?" Predictably the crowd begins its "U-S-A" chant, a tacky chant aimed at disturbing and intimidating America's opponents. As alluded to earlier, in a segment on Trump's favourite Fox News program, *Fox and Friends*, repeats Andrews' sentiments almost word-for-word in a segment proclaiming the evils of legendary children's program, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. As a basis for the claims, they cite Louisiana State professor of finance, Don Chance, whose qualification was

an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal complaining that millennials are too entitled. The hosts repeatedly referred to Chance's comment, "The world owes you nothing. You have to work and compete. If you want to be special, you'll have to prove it" (qtd. in Mikkelson 2019). *Grand Theft Auto* seemingly envisions the worst stereotype every other nation holds about America, Americans, and American exceptionalism. Trump merely makes it real. One could argue he is actually the most American president.

In this regard, then it is worth noting that *Grand Theft Auto* also hits three of the American right's favourite talking points: hatred of immigrants, conspiracy theories, and pandering to the Christian right. The last more notably appears in *GTA: Vice City*, but a corrupt preacher hangs out with gangsters and Russian mobsters in Jizzy's club. In fact, *Grand Theft Auto* seems to have Rep Devin Nunes and his family in mind when a radio ad for "Proposition 832" proclaims, "19 million illegal aliens live in this country, [. . .] Our organization is Ban Immigration Greencards Outright Today! Let's preserve the status quo in our favour. [. . .] Illegal aliens do a valuable job packing our groceries and caring for your lawn. But they should learn America is not a land of handouts. While they're illegal they have no rights! They have no status! They have no expectations. And they're happy to be here. It's a win-win for America. If we give them green cards, soon they'll be just like us, overweight, unhappy, and too lazy to do menial tasks." Like Trump's own organization, the Nunes family relies on undocumented immigrants to work on their factory farms even as the politician actively campaigns against immigration and in favour of locking children in cages (Lizza 2018). In fact, this passage hints at aspects of American exceptionalism and its duplicity, as well as the hypocrisy of America's constant corporate welfare and attacks on the poor and on social programs. Moreover, America was built on exploiting others and their labour, whether it was slaves, Chinese labourers, undocumented workers, irregular immigrants, or First Nations.[8] It also reveals the duplicity of the mythical American dream, a myth exploded by another set of commercials for the American Bank of Los Santos. These promise to "help you get the debt you need to make life easier. We'll show you how to look richer and be poorer [. . .] it's only a risk if you get into money troubles or the economy changes, which doesn't seem likely." As we know, the USA still has not fully recovered from the "Great Recession." Wages remain stagnant and income disparity is at levels that resemble feudalism. Not surprisingly, then, the group in favour of keeping undocumented workers but also opposed to their naturalization has initials that spell out "B.I.G.O.T.," bigot. Fifteen years on, the speculative fiction of *Grand Theft Auto* seems almost prophetic and Stephen Miller, the zealous conspiracy theory advocate and architect of every one of Trump's racist and xenophobic immigration and Visa policies, seems more like a *GTA* character than a high-ranking government advisor.

Every game is a potential world. We have always known this to be true. Writing on a later installment of the series, I (Ouellette 2011) suggest that *Grand Theft Auto*'s satire takes place within a larger pastiche because the "genre of the model [. . .] is not only the same as the genre of the imitation, the imitation occurs within the context of a video game built around and celebrating the same qualities" (p. 205). This is precisely the terrain of speculative fiction, but also the very contingency of games. Russell Gill (2013) explains that speculative fiction not only entails a "representation of what would happen had the actual chain of causes or the matrix of reality-conditions been replaced with other conditions [. . .] some speculative fiction is intended to bring recognition better characterized by engagement" (p. 73). Games provide not only engagement, they also facilitate and foster the enactment of solutions and rehearsals to the problem. More specifically, then, *GTA: San Andreas* represents a world in which the chain of checks and balances on greed and institutional corruption have been supplanted and the primary condition, which is also the win condition, is to beat the corrupt figures at their own game.

---

8   These last two terms are the preferred nomenclature adopted by the Canadian government.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, in considering games as speculative, even prophetic fiction, we can most assuredly contribute to ongoing social critique and more importantly, how to improve things. This may seem counter-intuitive, but as Martin-Lucas (2014) notes, dystopic speculative fiction involves "catastrophic futures in the wake of nuclear disaster, ecological ruin, global economic crisis, totalitarian regimes, or more often a combination of all of these. Although dystopia is usually considered a pessimistic and depressive mode of writing, this is in fact a genre of hope: after all, there is a life beyond the apocalypse and, even more importantly, dystopic fictions' cautionary tales signal the ways to prevent it happening" (p. 85). This is precisely what games do. Solving a game is always about solving a problem. A vast, hybrid form like *GTA* more than fits the bill. It may not have the high-brow appeal of *Mass Effect*, which Hayden (2017) lauds for presenting the means to perceive political possibilities, but its scope, its content and its reach are no less laudable. Its portrayal of the rise of right-wing populism prepared me for political possibilities of the Trump presidency. Certainly, as an expat Canadian, I have a different sensibility. Nevertheless, as David Leonard (2003) reminds us, games offer

> insight into dominant ideologies, as well as the deployment of race, gender, and nationalism. [. . .] game players are able to transport themselves into foreign and dangerous environments [. . .] Video games thus operate as a sophisticated commodity that plays on the device of individuals to experience the other, breaking down real boundaries between 'communities' through virtual play, while simultaneously 'teaching' its players about stereotypes, United States foreign policy, and legitimization of the status quo, to name only a few. (p. 1)

What becomes clear, then, is that one encounters these elements in *GTA* through stories, side-missions, parallel texts, meta-texts, and incidental moments. It is through the actual play of the game, building a multi-ethnic, multi-racial network of alliances, taking down corrupt police and politicians, and acting most definitely like a socialist in forming a "family" that one wins the game. *GTA* does offer its own solution to the problem of an American authoritarian regime: take it to the streets and beat them at their own game.

In fact, the overwhelming tendency in the scholarship has been to put games alongside other media to argue for their relevance. We should be enumerating instances of games *as speculative* not as being mentioned alongside speculative fiction. Likewise, games scholars should be highlighting the fact that games afford players the simultaneity of enacting and of witnessing the speculative fiction.[9] Put simply, this is the moment the game functionally and literally becomes its own intertext. Hearing one of Donald Trump's incoherent speeches evokes a memory of having played *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, not the other way around. According to Martin-Lucas (2014, p. 85), the defining criteria for contemporary speculative fiction is that it engages in "historically informed extrapolation[s] of current affairs if it is to remain a genre of social critique." This applies to the experience of the game as an extended or complete pastiche scenario (Blythe & Wright, 2006). Not only does *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* offer a critique of the culture in which it was produced, it speculates about its future and offers critiques of the dystopia to come. Moreover, the study of games as speculative fiction offers an(other) instance in which the study of games contributes to the study of more traditional narrative forms, for speculative fiction is necessarily participatory, a facet also left underexplored in the literature. Where literature lets people rehearse responses to dystopia, games let them simulate and practice those responses, as well. While Brabazon, Redhead, and Chivaura (2018) quite rightly note that people shocked and appalled by the Trump regime turned to speculative fiction to help them make sense of things, it is equally important to note that Condis (2018) likewise notes that games became a source for "memes and talking points" that the alt-right latched onto in an effort attract followers (p. 103). Thus, games represent a

---

9   In French, we might call this *témoignage*, which roughly translates to witness/testimony.

contested space, one that scholars would be well advised to consider more seriously or, as she writes later, "we risk abandoning one of the world's largest entertainment and communication machines to those who would use it for evil ends" (27 March 2019).[10] Games, then, offer an important complement when teaching the genre just as surely as speculative fiction should become a regular feature of game design. Participation takes the form of playing through not just the text but also the dystopia we are currently enduring and unfortunately, those to come.

WORKS CITED

@MyOwnVelouria (Bonnie (Bo) Ruberg). 2019. Thread: "Ok folks, I'm not really a "thread person," but this is something I think is really important, so here it goes. A thread about peer reviewing & how it inadvertently opens feminist, queer, & POC game studies scholars (especially folks who work on social justice) to harassment:" *Twitter*, 6 Aug. , 2019, 2:29 p.m., https://twitter.com/MyOwnVelouria/status/1158807265270304768.

Aarseth, Espen J. "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation." *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan,* MIT Press, 2004, pp.pp. 45-55. Blythe, Mark A., and Peter C.Wright. "Pastiche Scenarios: Fiction as a Resource for User Centred Design." *Interacting with Computers*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2006, pp. 1139-1164.

Bogost, Ian. (2008). "The Phenomenology of Videogames." In Günzel et al. (eds.), *Conference Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games 2008*. Potsdam, University of Potsdam.

Bowman, Nick. D. "The Rise (and Refinement) of Moral Panic." *The Video Game Debate: Unraveling the Physical; Social; and Psychological Effects of Digital Games*, edited by Rachel Kowert and Thorston Quandt, Routledge, 2016, pp. 22–38.

Brabazon, Tara., et al. *Trump Studies: An Intellectual Guide to Why Citizens Vote Against their Interests*, Emerald Group Publishing, 2018..

Bui, Lynn, et al. "Jarrod Ramos Admits Killing Five in Capital Gazette Newsroom Attack." *The Washington Post, 28 Oct. 2019* https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/jarrod-ramos-admits-guilt-in-capital-gazette-shooting-that-killed-5/2019/10/28/39bcd226-f990-11e9-ac8c-8eced29ca6ef_story.html. Accessed 22 Nov. 2019.

Condis, Megan. *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks & the Gendered Battle for Online Culture*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2018.

---. "From *Fornite* to Alt-Right." *The New York Times*, 27 Mar. 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/opinion/gaming-new-zealand-shooter.html. Accessed 19 Feb. 2021.

Cuder-Domínguez, Pilar. "The Politics of Gender and Genre in Asian Canadian Women's Speculative Fiction: Hiromi Goto and Larissa Lai." *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography*, edited by Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008, pp. 115-131.

Dixon, Winston Wheeler, editor. *Film and Television after 9/11*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick. "Digital Labour, Species-Becoming and the Global Worker." *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, vol. 10, no. 3/4, 2010, pp. 484-503. http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/digital-labour-species-becoming-and-global-worker

Fisher, Jolene. "Digital Games, Developing Democracies, and Civic Engagement: A Study of Games in

---

10   Here, I have to admit that the accompanying headline "From *Fortnite* to Alt-Right" gives me more than a little pause and in reading the article, I am sure it was a newspaper "clickbait" headline more than a reflection of the content. Indeed, the opinion piece acknowledges that games are a "vector" for alt-right recruitment online and this is certainly the case. However, social media provided an important mechanism for the "Arab spring" and games are becoming a key means of promoting civic engagement and democratic principles in developing countries (Fisher, 2020).

Kenya and Nigeria." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 42, no. 7-8, 2020, pp. 1309-1325. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914030

Gill, Russell B. "The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction." *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2013, pp. 71-85.

Grainger, James. "Jordan Peterson on Embracing Your Inner Lobster in *12 Rules for Life*." *Toronto Star*, 22 Jan. 2018. https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2018/01/22/jordan-peterson-on-embracing-your-inner-lobster-in-12-rules-for-life.html. Accessed 23 May 2019.

Haltiwanger, John. "Obama Faced Relentless Opposition to Gun Reform, Even after a Shooting that left 20 Children Dead." *Business Insider*, 6 Aug. 2019. https://www.businessinsider.com/why-obama-faced-relentless-opposition-gun-reform-after-sandy-hook-2019-8. Accessed 17 Aug. 2019.

Hayden, Craig. "The Procedural Rhetorics of *Mass Effect*: Video Games as Argumentation in International Relations." *International Studies Perspectives*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2017, pp. 175-193. https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekw002

Jones, Calvert W., and Celia Paris. "It's the End of the World and They Know it: How Dystopian Fiction Shapes Political Attitudes." *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2018, pp. 969-989. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718002153

Kohler, Chris. "How *Grand Theft Auto* Jacked the House of Lords." *Wired*, 27 March 2012. https://www.wired.com/2012/03/grand-theft-auto-jacked/. Accessed 22 Oct. 2019.

Leonard, David. "'Live in Your World, Pplay in Ours': Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other." *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2003, pp. 1-9. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5858/9cfef3bb9abeaf029bf9708a9cc75428c373.pdf

Lyons, Kate, and Patrick Wintour. "Footage Appears to Show World Leaders Joking about Trump at Nato Summit." *The Guardian*, 4 Dec. 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/04/footage-appears-to-show-world-leaders-joking-about-trump-at-nato-summit. Accessed 17 Mar. 2020.

Martín-Lucas, Belén. "Dystopic Urbanites: Civilian Cyborgs in TransCanadian Speculative Fictions." *Literature and the Glocal City: Reshaping the English Canadian Imaginary*, edited by Ana María Fraile-Marcos, Routledge, 2014, pp. 85-98.

McAllister, Kenneth. S., et al. "Apportioned Commodity Fetishism and the Transformative Power of Game Studies." *Examining the Evolution of Gaming and Its Impact on Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives*, edited by Keri D. Valentine & Lucas J. Jensen, IGI Global, 2016, pp. 95-122.

Mikkelson, David. "Did *Fox and Friends* Call Fred Rogers an 'Evil, Evil Man'"? *Snopes*, 12 Aug. 2019. https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/fox-fred-rogers-evil/. Accessed 26 Feb. 2020.

Morrissette, Jess. "'I'd Like to Bbuy the World a Nuka-cola': The Purposes and Meanings of Video Game Soda Machines." *Game Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2020. www.gamestudies.org. http://gamestudies.org/2001/articles/jessmorrissette.

Orden, Erica. "Parnas Recording Shows Trump Talking with Indicted Businessmen the President Has Said He Doesn't Know." *CNN*, 25 Jan. 2020. https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/25/politics/recording-trump-lev-parnas-igor-fruman-ukraine-ambassador/index.html. Accessed 15 Mar. 2020.

Ouellette, Marc A. (2010) "'Removing the Checks and Balances that Hamper Democracy': Play and the Counter-hegemonic Contradictions of *Grand Theft Auto IV*." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 197-213.

---. "'Next Time We Go Bowling': Play and the Homosocial in the *Grand Theft Auto IV* series." *Learning the Virtual Life: Public Pedagogy in a Digital World*, edited by Peter P. Trifonas, Routledge, 2011, pp. 171-177.

Pérez-Latorre, Óliver, et al. "Recessionary Games: Video Games and the Social Imaginary of the Great Recession (2009–2015)." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 25, no. 5-6, 2019, pp. 884-900. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517744489

Picchi, Aimee. "Video Game Makers Face Backlash after El Paso Shooting." *CBS News*, 6 Aug. 2019. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/violent-video-games-kevin-mccarthy-trump-blame-video-game-makers-backlash-after-el-paso-shooting-2019-08-06/. Accessed 17 Aug. 2019.

Reich, Robert. "Mitch McConnell is Destroying the Senate---and American Government." *The Guardian*, 6 Apr. 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/06/mitch-mcconnell-senate-republicans-donald-trump-judges. Accessed 23 May 2019.

Roig-Franzia, Manuel, and Sarah Ellison. "A History of the Trump War on Media—The Obsession Not Even Coronavirus Could Stop." *The Washington Post*, 29 March 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/a-history-of-the-trump-war-on-media--the-obsession-not-even-coronavirus-could-stop/2020/03/28/71bb21d0-f433-11e9-8cf0-4cc99f74d127_story.html. Accessed 29 Mar. 2020.

Sanmarti, Marcal. "Are Videogames the Next Frontier for Politics?" *New Zealand International Review*, vol. 44, issue 5, 2019, pp. 6-10. https:///doi/10.3316/INFORMIT.621713423817688. Accessed 22 Nov. 2019.

Schulzke, Markus. "Refighting the Cold War: Video Games and Speculative History." *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, edited by Matthew W. Kapell & Andrew B.R. Elliott, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 261-275.

Tarnoff, Ben. "Donald Trump, Peter Thiel and the Death of Democracy." *The Guardian*, 21 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/21/peter-thiel-republican-convention-speech. Accessed 17 Mar. 2020.

Tatum, Sophie. "Pruitt on Chick-fil-A: 'We need more of them in Tulsa and we need more of them across the country.'" *CNN*, 6 June 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/06/politics/scott-pruitt-chick-fil-a/index.html. Accessed 16 Mar. 2020.

Urbanski, Heather. *Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-eyed Monsters: How Speculative Fiction Shows Us Our Nightmares*. McFarland, 2015.

Wade, Peter. "Fully Armed Rally-goers Enter Kentucky's Capitol Building with Zero Resistance." *Rolling Stone*, 1 Feb. 2020. https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/fully-armed-rally-goers-enter-kentuckys-capitol-building-with-zero-resistance-946606/. Accessed 17 Mar. 2020.

Wagner, Meg., et al. "Suspect Arrested after Explosive Devices Sent to Trump Critics and CNN." *CNN*, 5 Nov. 2018. https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/clintons-obama-suspicious-packages/. Accessed 15 Mar. 2020.

Webb, Kevin. "You Can Get *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* for Free Right Now—Here's How to Claim Your Copy." *Business Insider*, 17 Sept. 2019. https://www.businessinsider.com/grand-theft-auto-san-andreas-free-download-rockstar-games-launcher-2019-9. Accessed 15 Mar. 2020.

Williams, Timothy, Adam Goldman, and Neil MacFarquhar. "Virginia Capital on Edge as FBI Arrests Suspected Neo-Nazis before Gun Rally. *The New York Times*, 22 Jan. 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/16/us/fbi-arrest-virginia-gun-rally.html. Accessed 15 Mar. 2020.

Wills, John. *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

Zimm, Michael. "Video Games are Literature's New Frontier." *Venture Beat*, 13 Aug. 2019, https://venturebeat.com/2019/08/13/video-games-are-literatures-new-frontier/. Accessed 15 Mar. 2020.

AUTHOR BIO

Marc A. Ouellette teaches Cultural and Gender Studies at Old Dominion University. He is an award-winning educator and is a Hixon Fellow.

SUGGESTED REFERENCE

APA

Ouellete, M. (2021). Society doesn't owe you anything: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas & video games as speculative fiction. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy, 8*(1), http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v8-issue-1/society-doesnt-owe-you-anything-grand-theft-auto-san-andreas-video-games-as-speculative-fiction/

MLA

Ouellete, Marc. "Society Doesn't Owe You Anything: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas & Video Games as Speculative Fiction." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy,* vol. 8, no. 1, 2021. http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v8-issue-1/society-doesnt-owe-you-anything-grand-theft-auto-san-andreas-video-games-as-speculative-fiction/