



Copyright © 2023 *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*  
All rights reserved.  
ISSN: 1070-8286

---

Representations of Violence, Surveillance, and Imprisonment in  
*A Way Out* and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided – A Criminal Past*

Bilguundari Enkhtugs

University of Winnipeg

Kevin Walby

University of Winnipeg

### Abstract

Video game representations of the carceral have become popular among gamers, shaping public views of justice and punishment. Drawing on semiotic and discourse analysis, we examine representations of prison and prisoners appearing in two popular video games *Deus Ex, Mankind Divided – A Criminal Past* and *A Way Out*. Adopting a cultural criminological approach to analyzing video games as popular culture, we examine how representations of surveillance, violence, prisons as schools of crime, escape, and police undercover operations add to stereotypes used to define prisons and the people who are both detained and work inside them. Adding to literature on video games and representations of carceral spaces, and analyzing how these games act as reservoirs of retributive sentiments toward prisoners and criminalized people, we show the characters of these games are displayed as conniving perpetrators deserving to be caught and punished.

*Keywords:* video games, representations, prison, punishment, surveillance, culture

## Introduction

Cultural representations of imprisonment and punishment shape how citizens understand carceral settings and the people who are detained within them. Criminologists and criminal justice scholars have long focused on cultural representations of the carceral. Notably, O’Sullivan (2001) and Fiddler (2007) contend that Hollywood cinema depicting prisons, including films such as *Con Air* and *Shawshank Redemption*, use denigrating tropes and stereotypes to convey ideas about imprisonment and prisoners. Mason (2006) similarly argues that the British media, including the tabloid media, offer distorted and narrowly framed stories about prisons and other carceral spaces in Britain. It is valuable to study such carceral representations because these depictions shape how the public perceives how prison populations should be treated. Comic book analysis reveals that portrayals of superhero characters and their actions were in favor of vigilantism that overrides due process (Phillips & Strobl, 2006). Moran (2012), for example, claims that prisoner reintegration and stigma are challenging issues that people face, which are made more difficult by stereotypes regarding criminalized people. Similar to their media predecessors – Hollywood cinema and tabloid media – video game representations of the carceral have become popular among video gamers, shaping public views of justice and punishment.

Video games are a form of popular culture, and they shape popular culture too by providing tropes, characters, and icons that proliferate in media (Spokes, 2020; Gee, 2008). Literature on video games claims these forms of play may be used for entertainment and retreatism (Denham & Spokes, 2021) and may foster a range of attitudes spanning violence (Bowman et al., 2022; Denham et al., 2021) or pro-social outlooks (Denham & Spokes, 2019). Video games may perpetuate myths regarding imprisonment, punishment, and prisoners. Indeed, Downing and Lavan (2016) contend video games are a limited forum for communicating about the pains of imprisonment, and that video games and other new media experiences may not do much to convey humanistic and holistic views of criminalization. In this paper, we examine the representations of imprisonment and punishment found in *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided – A Criminal Past* and *A Way Out*. These games are rich in representations of the imprisoned as well as criminal justice processes and staff. We examine these video games to explore the representations depicted in the implications for understanding the intersection of popular culture and imprisonment. Roth et al. (2018) have examined *A Way Out* and some of what they call “narrative paradoxes” in this video game. Analyzing how these video games are reservoirs of retributive sentiments toward prisoners and criminalized people (Phillips & Strobl, 2006; Sanders & Lyon, 1995) and also platforms of depicting prisoners and prison escape, we build on their insights in our analysis of themes appearing in these games.

To do so, we draw from literature on semiotic video game analysis. Tardini and Cantoni (2005) suggest that identities and values are communicated and shaped in online spaces, including video game communities. Hawreliak and Lemieux (2020) suggest that it is important to study the visual representations or the semiotics of video games as well as the discourses that circulate in such video games. As Squire (2006) argues, playing video games is exposure to and participation in a particular ideology. We draw from these studies in deciding on steps for data collection and analysis. Our inquiry is also motivated by cultural criminology, notably works that examine how forms of popular culture construct transgression and the criminal justice apparatus (Phillips & Strobl, 2006; Rafter, 2001). This fascinating literature has examined how cartoons (Kort-Butler, 2012), comics (Adkinson, 2008; Stoddart, 2006), film (Clevenger & Acquaviva, 2020; Bosch, 2016; Welsh et al., 2011), and even music (Steinmetz & Henderson, 2016) depict crime and responses to it.

First, we will examine pertinent literature on video game representations. In the second section, we outline our methodological procedures. In the third section, we offer our analysis. We compare the two video games, *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided – A Criminal Past* and *A Way Out*, and offer how certain themes on the representation of imprisonment and punishment converge in both video games. We also elaborate on our observations depicting what prisons, prisoners, and prison guards are supposed to be. Discourse analysis reveals

both prisoners and correctional officers assume different portrayals of conniving characters engaged with justice and injustice either deserving or undeserving punishment. Building on Roth et al.'s (2018) insights, we illustrate how myths and stereotypes regarding imprisonment and punishment are represented in these video games in support of punishment, retribution, and derogatory treatment. In our discussion, we reflect on the implications of this work for conceptualizing popular culture, gaming culture, and justice.

### Literature Review and Conceptual Position

Video gaming is a growing area of academic inquiry. Some literature in this area focuses on the behavioral and moral implications of video games for video game players. For example, Hartmann et al. (2010) argue that playing violent video games may lead to more interest in violent representations, but it can also create empathy and sympathy. This is a noteworthy finding as it shows that cultural representations, if curated and designed in a particular way, can shape less punitive or vindictive views. Asimos (2018) conceptualizes video game narratives as myths that players interpret to form moral values. Similarly, Piittinen (2018) finds that players make a moral choice to help the villains based on the villain's overall portrayal and role in the game. Klimt et al. (2009) claim that playing video games can help people realize a sense of self and form a sense of identity. These findings are significant because they show how video games are not passive hobbies but can have a real impact on our social and cultural lives.

Cunningham et al. (2016) claim that there may be some connection between violent video games and violent crime, although the connection is varied and influenced by a number of other variables. McCaffree and Proctor (2018) argue that the relationship between video games and crime may be different than presupposed in the literature on violence in video games. These authors suggest that video game players may be isolated or cocooned from law-breaking activities. They raise questions about the social and the health implications of video games while questioning the hypothesis that violent video games cause violent crime. Oleszkiewicz et al. (2018) explore the idea that prison-themed videos games might increase punitiveness and harsh views of criminality. Ferguson and Colwell (2020) conclude that sexualized game contexts have little effect on sexist attitudes and empathy towards women, though there is more research needed in this domain.

There is also a critical literature on video games, some of which investigates the framing of representations in video games. Whitson (2019) notes that designers and producers in the game industry are shaped by dominant political and economic views, while their designs, scripts and storylines may reflect neoliberal understandings of society and a new entrepreneurial spirit of capitalism. These discourses can be woven right into the storylines of the games. Whitson and Simon (2014) argue that there is an intersection between video games and surveillance, not only in terms of what is represented but also the kinds of monitoring of players that can occur by companies and monitoring of players by other players, a form of lateral surveillance. Parker et al. (2018) claim that even independent video games that strive to work on the boundaries or at the edges of the video game industry also reproduce some kinds of knowledge about society and are similarly framing social relations in particular ways in their video game designs. Therefore, it is important to reflect on these representations to examine what kinds of views of culture and politics they depict.

Similar in some ways to video games depicting criminal justice, there are video games representing military occupations assessed in a growing literature. For example, Robinson (2015) examines how American exceptionalism and American hegemony is depicted in military video games. Salter (2011) suggests that military video games, as well as video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, have a geographical imaginary within them that reflects American dominance as well as white settler dominance and mobility.

There is extensive literature on representations of identity and stereotypes in video games and popular culture. Leonard (2003), for instance, argues that representations of race and otherness in video games lead to a kind of social distance and othering that may reproduce stereotypical ideas regarding race and ethnicity that

could even lead to racist views (also see Selepak, 2010). Leonard (2006) claims that it is important to examine depictions of race and gender in video games, just as it is important to do so for television movies and other media. Other scholars claim that video games, as well as video game commentary, can be full of stereotypes and colorblind racism (McKernan, 2015; Dickerman et al., 2008). There can be a form of disparagement in video game culture that continues to privilege whiteness and vilify Black, Latino, and Indigenous persons. Levan et al. (2020) also focus on representations of gender in video games. They contend that prison-theme video games can depict gender stereotypes that may reproduce these stereotypes. While some authors argue that video games, such as *Silent Hill* and other horror-themed video games, may reproduce stereotypes regarding masculinity and femininity (Kirkland, 2009; Gabbiadini, 2016), others assert that violent video games express the belief in masculine gender roles and norms as aggressive, tough, dominant, and suppressing emotions (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019). However, there is nuance here. Beliefs of masculinity were not associated with negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, or femininity in this study (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019). Drawing from literature on social psychology, Granic et al. (2014) claim that playing video games can have positive effects, including emotional, cognitive, motivational, and social. Yet, Burgess et al. (2007) contend that in addition to the content of video games, the covers of video games depict masculinity and femininity in reductionist ways. Finally, Nie (2013) assumes that video games not only depict race and gender, but they may reproduce myths regarding sexuality, ability, and nationalism. There is a significant amount of ideological work that happens in video games construing certain forms of nationalism as natural and social goods (Nie, 2013).

What all this literature shows and what we argue is that video games, far from being passive or benign representations, are sites of communication and a site of struggle over how our world is depicted and understood implying retribution and punishment. Game players can in part construct the narrative that unfolds in the game by making certain decisions (Roth et al., 2018). However, much of the narrative and many of the core themes are coded directly into the scenes and representations of the game and cannot be altered (see Cybulski, 2014). These types of representations lead themselves to investigation using semiotic and discursive approaches to data analysis. Cultural criminology invites scholars to examine cultural products and artifacts at the intersection of crime, law, and power (Ferrell et al., 2008; Young, 2004). Doing so helps to demonstrate how forms of culture, including media communications, convey and replicate dominant myths regarding crime and the criminal justice apparatus. Drawing from cultural criminology analyses that focus on how popular culture and media shape and reflect public views of law and transgression, we find that the video games reflect what Sanders and Lyon (1995) call repetitive retribution, that is a tendency to blame, surveil, and punish prisoners construed as conniving (Levan & Downing, 2019).

### Methodological Approach

To examine carceral depictions in video games, we first searched for all video games containing representations of imprisonment and punishment. We sought to examine video games that had a certain density of such representations, by which we mean where most scenes and gameplay occurred within carceral spaces or in relation to carcerality. We also sought to sample video games that had not been closely investigated yet in gaming or criminological literature. Both video games were played in their entirety. Field notes were made on each scene (Wolfinger, 2002). Dialogue among characters was transcribed verbatim. Screen captures were taken of particular scenes for later reference.

We then sought to analyze these data using semiotic analysis and discourse analysis. Semiotic analysis allows us to examine the relationship between signs and signifiers appearing in these representations. We focused on the content, format, and context (Valverde, 2006). This type of semiotic analysis allows for detailed examination of the visual content of video games. We also use discourse analysis to examine some of the verbal and textual information communicated in these video games. Discourse analysis allows us to examine whether

the textual and verbal data in the video games convey more widespread discursive tropes regarding imprisonment, punishment, prisoners, and the criminal justice system. Adding to Hawreliak and Lemieux's (2020) methodology, we combine semiotic and discourse analysis and strengthen a multi-modal approach to examining video games and their content (Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020). In addition, similar to Tardini and Cantoni (2005) and Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017), drawing on semiotic and discourse analysis in video game studies, we contribute to the methodological outlook of video game studies, as well as criminal justice studies examining popular culture, which is more and more focusing on visual representations (McClanahan, 2021), such as penal museums and video games.

We begin with descriptions of the video games examined. We then offer our analysis on the four recurring representations: surveillance and control, violence, prisons as schools of crime, and police undercover operations. Based on the variations we observe through semiotic and discourse analysis, we also offer a comparison of the plots of the games as well as representations of carceral spaces and people within these spaces.

### Tracking Violence, Surveillance, and Imprisonment in Two Video Games

*Deus Ex, Mankind Divided – A Criminal Past* starts in the year 2029. The main character, Interpol Agent Adam Jensen is sent to the Pent House to obtain insider information from his colleague – Interpol Agent named Guerrero – about the Junk Yard's planning of a terrorist attack. The Pent House is a maximum-security institution in Arizona, US, used to house people with augmented organs and limbs (half-human and half-machine). The Junk Yard is a criminal organization that operates inside the Pent House. At the beginning of the game, players are told Agent Guerrero has been doing undercover work to infiltrate the Junk Yard for the past two years. With his arrival to the Pent House, Agent Jensen's main goal is to gather intelligence information about a planned terrorist attack and to free himself and Guerrero by escaping the institution. Before freeing themselves from the prison, Jensen needs to release Guerrero from solitary confinement. Prisoners in the Pent House are considered violent and dangerous to public safety because of their augmented abilities. To suppress their non-human abilities, upon the prisoners' entrance to the Pent House, a chip is installed inside the newly admitted prisoners' necks. Toward the end of the game, players understand the details about the terrorist attack were misinformation, and Agent Guerrero has been working for the Junk Yard (besides being an undercover Interpol Agent). Game players also find that Agent Guerrero has been leading the secret operation, called "Harvesting," led by Junk Yard inside the Pent House.

"Harvesting" is the operation that targets prisoners for augmented organ and limb trafficking. This enterprise is carried out in "Hole no. 6" – a solitary confinement unit where murders for trafficking occur. Through Jensen's mission finding Agent Guerrero, players enter cell no. 6 and see a violent scene of a tunnel full of bloodstains and uniforms covered in blood. At the time of Agent Jensen's arrival to the Pent House, a rumour is spread in the Pent House that people disappear and are killed seemingly for no reason in one of the solitary confinement cells, to which prisoners refer as the "slaughterhouse." This rumour and the fear of being killed are proven to be true when one of the well-respected prisoners, Wilburg, is found dead. Out of fear, the prisoners decide to organize a riot. While the riot takes place, Agent Jensen finds out Guerrero's involvement with Junk Yard, and the game ends with the agents escaping from the prison to Interpol.

*A Way Out* is a cooperative game that requires a participation of two players who assume the main characters of the game: Vincent Moretti and Leo Carusso. The game starts with Vincent going to prison as a prisoner. Vincent is a police officer assuming undercover work with the hope to befriend Leo. Leo is portrayed as an accomplice of a criminal organization that is led by Harvey. As the plot of the game progresses, players realize that before getting into prison Vincent led another undercover operation, in which his late brother Gary, a police officer, was a participant. Even though Leo was an informant for the police in support of Harvey's

arrest, Leo could not predict Harvey's behavior, which resulted in Gary's death. While Leo is sentenced to life in prison for siding with Harvey (resulting in the death of a police officer), Vincent decides to become Leo's neighbor in the role of prisoner and next to Leo's prison cell. Both Leo and Vincent are desperate to punish Harvey, as he betrayed Leo and killed Vincent's brother. This dramatic revelation is eventually understood by players at the end of the game.

*A Way Out* is designed to promote cooperation of the two main characters, as the absence of cooperation will not allow players to move forward and escape the prison. The storyline populates the game with representations of escape, which are of interest to critical and cultural criminologists (Ricoardeau, 2018) given that these scenes also contain depictions of prisoners and criminal justice personnel. Teaming up with Vincent, Leo trusts him and reveals his escape plan, as they have the same goal: to find a way out of the prison, then find Harvey for their revenge. In the game, group tasks include tricking guards, distracting guards and other prisoners, transferring a wrench from one cell to another, fighting and defeating guards, and so on. Vincent and Leo escape the prison at the same time as a thunderstorm begins. A thunderstorm is chosen as an opportune night to escape, as the thunderstorm obscures their activities with fewer security guards on duty. A thunderstorm also makes game players feel the rush of fleeing and being in danger, just like the main characters in the game. After their escape from the prison, Leo and Vincent continuously engage in many different tasks outside of prison. Ultimately, they face Harvey in Mexico and take him down. The game ends with Vincent's identity revealed, despite his friendship and his relationship built with Leo. Although there were moments where Vincent could have saved Leo, Vincent chose to keep his real identity secret and remained truthful to his undercover duties. Eventually, players endure a confrontation between Vincent and Leo, where either of them kills the other. Players are left with a feeling of sadness, deception, dissonance, and betrayal, as the game offers an unfortunate ending where only one of the two main characters survives.

### Surveillance and Control

Reflecting the theme of governing through security, surveillance, and the fear of living under the threat of terrorist attack, the only reason Agent Jensen from the *Deus Ex* is sent to the Pent House relates to preventing the terrorist attack from happening. This game represents both reality and the drama of living under the fear of attack. Although visual portrayals of terrorism are non-existent in the game, the main character (and Interpol) uses a precautionary approach, which he later discovers to be related to misinformation (i.e. no attack was planned). This narrative of 'governing through the fear of crime' and 'war of terror' (Robinson, 2015) that is repeated in popular media as well as news media is also repeated within the game. It is in this context that content regarding surveillance, control, and escape (also see Levan & Downing, 2019) emerges in the games.

In *Deus Ex*, the Pent House is portrayed as a high-technology eight-story maximum security institution designed to deter and incapacitate humans with augmented abilities. The game revolves around the images of metal gates, mechanical doors, and security cameras made for total isolation and total control. Outside the prison, players see the Pent House being equipped with several cameras and an electric fence that is triggered by a security alarm. If prisoners are caught outside of the institution, red lasers detect the prisoner who then end up in detention in solitary confinement.

While players see technologically-driven prison security outside of the prison, they also encounter similar conditions inside a prisoner's cell. Video game players see thick metal walls, a metal twin bed, a metal toilet and sink connected to one another, a metal table, and personal hygiene amenities, such as a toilet roll, shampoo, and towel. A couple of steps away from the table, players see a recycling bin, storage bin, radiator, and air conditioning vent. There is also a secret panel in some of the prisoners' cells where traded objects, such as pills and drugs, are hidden. The game is customized to give the sense of freedom of choice to prisoners by allowing them to have catalogs and posters according to a prisoner's hobbies and interests.

In addition to the architecture of the Pent House, game players are exposed to robots that use infrared lights for mobility surveillance. The game is designed to transcend the perception of physical violence (i.e. extermination of prisoners) with focus on high-tech infrared lights attached to robots. The use of robots in the game is pervasive, as players often hear announcements, such as “[a]utomated security robots must be respected and followed.” Moreover, game players are exposed to the idea that prisons are places where a war between the prisoners and the guards happens. Robot guards are used to respond to disturbances incited by prisoners. “Armed, shielded, and heavily booted techno-warriors” (Kraska, 2001, as cited in Rhodes, 2007, p. 555) are visible in every step, perpetuating violence, incapacitation, and deterrence while overlooking the goal of rehabilitation of correctional services. In addition to the robots, a high-tech gun drone is used to kill the prisoners participating in the riot. Poison gas is released to intoxicate prisoners in open spaces, such as on the roof and in the field, while helicopters are used for surveillance and control. As the players hear another announcement “[s]urrender to your nearest correctional officer immediately, or deadly force will be used against you,” the prisoners are overpowered by militaristic types of robot-guards, gun drones, and helicopters. Game players are left with a sense that prison spaces and prison administrations are places of maximum surveillance, control, and punishment.

Agent Jensen learns that all facilities, including offices and prisoners’ trade skill workspaces, require cards or passcodes for access. As Jensen enters the correctional officers’ workspace, he sees a cubicle-like office room filled with filing cabinets and equipped with several monitors connected to security cameras. With this portrayal of office spaces inside the Pent House, an officer can control and see any of the prisoners from a distance at any time. When Jensen enters the security room, he locates fellow Interpol Agent Guerrero being locked up in the solitary unit no. 4. Game players can see that the prison guards’ workspace is designed to prioritize high efficiency both in terms of technology and paperwork. A representation of efficiency and productivity enables game players to understand that women can also do the traditionally masculine work of a prison guard. This is also one of the ways video games can normalize and legitimize carceral and institutional space (Wolf, 2011).

In contrast to *Deus Ex*, high-end technology, surveillance, and security features are not central in *A Way Out*. However, game players always confront correctional officers in uniforms, wearing black suits, army caps, and ties. These officers use batons to discipline the prisoners, and only whistles are used in cases of emergency. Similar to *Deus Ex*, facilities such as laundry rooms, carpentry, and security offices require a card to unlock. Vincent arrives at the prison in a correctional facility bus and enters the correctional institution through metal detector gates. He observes that the basketball field, carpentry, and laundry rooms are surveilled by several guards. Security cameras are found in common spaces inside the prison. At the same time, a panopticon-style architecture prevails the construction of the prison, which enables guards watch and control prisoners’ movements. Although officers are unarmed, they regularly conduct pat-down searches on prisoners as well as search their cells each night. Prisoners are housed within old concrete wall cells. The prisoners’ cells contain a foldable bed with a mattress on it, a toilet (that does not work), a sink, a towel, and several shelves mounted on the wall. It is the toilet the escapers remove to break the wall to access tunnels used for the way out of the prison. At the time of Leo and Vincent’s escape, sniffer dogs chase game players. In contrast to *Deus Ex*, *A Way Out* conveys a sense of a lack of surveillance, security measures, and control, as officer and prisoner violence are portrayed as having equal power, whereby prisoners can carry weapons, like a knife, to attack each other and the guards. Similar to *Deus Ex*, the prison administration in *A Way Out* also has a continuous problem of keeping the prison free of violence, specifically, prisoners attacking the guards and one another.



## Portrayals of Correctional Officer Culture and Prisoner Violence

Prisons are stressful environments where violence is instigated and normalized in the form of punishment, often from guards (Marquart, 1986; Marquart & Roebuck, 1985; see also Weinrath, 2016; Ibsen, 2013). Though prisons may no longer be places of overt corporal punishment like paddling, imprisonment today is still marked by many pains. The violence of prisons is depicted in these games. In *Deus Ex*, players often hear threatening announcements, such as “[a]ny attempt to kill a guard will result in an expedited death sentence,” “[c]onduct yourselves in quiet and morally mannered at all times,” “[r]emember to keep yourself neat, clean, and free of contraband,” “[r]espect your guard, yourself, and most importantly, the rules,” and “[y]ou will receive a death sentence for the attempted murder of a fellow inmate or a guard.” Prison guards are encouraged to conduct themselves accordingly to these announcements where violence, threat, and derogation are prevalent. This discourse represents the idea of keeping prisons crime- and violence-free places, conveying a message that violence is accepted if exerted by correctional guards.

Prison guards create a correctional officer culture of violence targeting the prisoners. From his first encounter with the reception officer (in *A Way Out*), Vincent undergoes a physical examination, followed by the warden’s short and derogatory speech: “My name is Williams, and this is MY [with a high-pitch tone] prison. Any questions?” When one of the newly admitted prisoners asks about prison visit schedules, a correctional officer beats the prisoner following Williams’ order (his gaze and gesture being interpreted as an order to beat up the prisoner for asking the question). This scene shows that correctional officers must comply with orders of the warden despite their victims’ innocence. An example from *Deus Ex* shows prison guards standing by to support each other:

*Stenger said to kill the inmate, don’t worry about the paperwork. If you cover me, I got your back. What do we say? Every inmate was a threat to our lives, so we shot him.*

Instead of implementing a humane response based on mutual understanding, the officer culture promotes violence and ‘covering up’ for one another at times of disturbance.

Officers are portrayed in the games as being rude. They treat the prisoners as if they are lesser humans. *Deus Ex* players oftentimes hear expressions, such as “[j]ust give me a reason to put you in a hole” and “[t]he inmates have to learn to respect us.” We also observe that guards do not see prisoners in an altruistic way, but instead refer to prisoners as “animals” who are dangerous to society and deserve to be locked up. These guards compare their job duties with retail security in the conversation:

Woman guard 1: *My cousin is right, this is not much better than working in retail.*  
Woman guard 2: *Keep it down. Hope something happens.*

This excerpt from the conversation between two women guards indicates that when officers are bored, they instigate violence toward prisoners. Thus, not only are the officers in *Deus Ex* rude and demeaning, but they believe using violence toward prisoners when they are bored is acceptable. Notably, the dynamic of power and violence visualized through the officer culture imply that prisons accept immoral officer behavior toward prisoners.

In addition to officers’ inhumane behaviors, prisoners in *Deus Ex* are aware that they are under constant threat, as a prisoner shares his understanding about correctional officer culture: “[i]nmates won’t kill you, but guards will. The guards will set up situations where you are at fault. They kill us for fun. A guy had an ‘accident,’ and he was dead”, or “[i]f the choke [the chip installed at the entrance to suppress augmented powers] doesn’t kill us, the COs will,” or “[i]f one of us tries to escape, we will get shot, not sent out to solitary

confinement.” The game conveys a message that within the prison walls, prisoners are the targets of state violence, despite correctional officers having a duty to care for prisoners and act as a guardian whose main job is to rehabilitate and correct illegal behaviour. Correctional officers’ work culture promotes violence and threats resulting in physical and verbal violence.

While *Deus Ex* portrays correctional officer violence toward the prisoners, prisoners portrayed in *A Way Out* are equally violent towards correctional officers and fellow prisoners. For example, game players see a scene where a gang leader stabs one of the correctional officers multiple times resulting in the officer’s death. This scene takes place in the dining space where other prisoners are present. It symbolizes prisoner power over correctional officers, depicting prisoner culture and violence toward correctional officers. Moreover, we also observe a few prisoners referring to Vincent as “a new fish” saying: “You need to work out if you want to survive.” Following his fellow prisoner’s advice, Vincent goes to do chin-ups to show off masculinity and the desire to belong to the prison environment. Violence towards correctional officers and the way prisoners talk to each other echo the stereotypical and popular views of masculine identity that is encouraged in prisons (see also Levan et al., 2020), which implies that prisoners are also violent people deserving of punishment.

### Prisons as Schools of Crime

Portrayals of masculinity, toughness, and violence relate to representation of prisons as schools of crime. From this perspective, prisons are places where prisoners go to develop an unlawful criminal career, rather than being rehabilitated or prepared to reintegrate back to society (Matthews, 2020; Harris et al., 2018). From the beginning of these games, players see prisoners who know the prison rules. For example, prisoners understand that trading empowers them (and is perhaps the only means to achieve their goals), as prisoners repeatedly voice phrases such as “[t]rading is how you get things here” and “[y]ou need to trade here to survive” in both games. In addition, these prisoners learn to bribe prison guards, which represents that bribing authorities is acceptable within prison walls, while the same action outside of prison counts as an offence (see also Pyrooz et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Whether for honourable rationales or otherwise, offending increases among prisoners as the games go on. In *Deus Ex*, a fellow prisoner incites and leads the prison riot over his safety concerns. This prisoner believed that if they did not overpower officers and the prison administration, he will be killed by being placed in “Hole no. 6.” With reasonable intentions (for his protection), he commits an offence inside the prison.

Escape is a common trope in other cultural representations of prisons (Bennett, 2018; Ricordeau, 2018; see also Mussell et al., 2023; Ferguson et al., 2017) and is prominent in these games. Leo and Vincent in *A Way Out* commit an offence by carrying out their escape plan. Leo’s escape consisted of careful planning, knowledge about prison architecture, and reliable networking. Leo and Vincent complete multiple group tasks that pressed them exchange stories about their personal lives and their individual experiences with their common enemy. Leo possesses good social interpersonal skills that helped him to build an advantageous relationship with other prisoners. This was evident when he had a chisel delivered to him in a book (most likely to be Bible), the tool he used to break the wall. Similarly, Jensen’s escape plan to shut down the transport tracking system and disable anti-aircraft turrets also worked in *Deus Ex* due to his knowledge of Pent House architecture. Leo and Agent Jensen’s knowledge of the prison architecture was demonstrated by their navigation through the ventilation system, as the ventilation system was their means to remain ‘unseen’ and ‘uncaught’ at times of surveillance and control. A careful planning of route, networking, and partnership building becomes instrumental to escaping the prisons for the main characters in these games, but this type of narrative construes prisoners as conniving and manipulative (Levan & Downing, 2019).

## Police Undercover Operations and Loyalty

The contents of both games revolve around police and Interpol undercover operations and their loyalty. Undercover police operations and collaborations between police and carceral institutions is a real aspect of criminal justice practice (Murphy, 2020; Schlemback, 2018; Joh, 2009). Even though the two video games analyzed here depict manipulative policing tactics, there are a few contrasting points in the representations of Jensen (from *Deus Ex*) and Vincent's (from *A Way Out*) motivations to pursue the undercover operations. While Agent Jensen is sent to the Pent House on his duty to protect the country from a potential terrorist attack, officer Vincent voluntarily decides to go to the prison for a personal reason (i.e. to befriend Vincent who had connections to Harvey – a criminal organization leader who killed Leo's brother). Jensen and Vincent's approaches to conducting the undercover operations were also different. While Vincent easily befriends Leo and even connects to his family members (meets Leo's wife and plays basketball with Leo's child after their successful escape), we see Jensen being distant from befriend anyone, including Agent Guerrero in the Pent House.

Equally important are the contrasting depictions of criminalities of Leo (from *A Way Out*) and Agent Guerrero (from *Deus Ex*). Although Leo was an informant to Vincent's brother before getting arrested, he later becomes a target of Vincent's undercover activity. Leo, being an orphan and having a difficult childhood, chooses to become an informant to the police force by entrapping Harvey. This was Leo's "way out" from the criminal life that he had wanted to escape. Regrettably, Leo ends up in prison with Vincent because of Harvey's spontaneous action, and he becomes the target of Vincent's undercover operation. Whereas Leo participated in criminal activities due to social and personal circumstances, such as growing up in an orphanage, Agent Guerrero voluntarily chooses to become a double agent, by taking part in the criminal organization Junk Yard and remaining as an Interpol Agent. Even though the main characters had personal reasons for choosing criminal paths, their actions and personalities are portrayed as deceitful and devious (Phillips & Strobl, 2006).

Beyond the depiction of the main characters' engagements in criminal activities, loyalty to professional duties and ethics is represented by contrasting differences between Vincent and Guerrero. While players question Vincent's loyalty to the police force, players also doubt Agent Guerrero's loyalty to Junk Yard. In contrast to Vincent, who chooses his professional duties over friendship and compassion, Guerrero 'sinks in' to the criminal organization, as he becomes a prestigious member of the Junk Yard betraying Interpol. Thus, Guerrero's betrayal of his professional duties is the antithesis of Vincent's loyalty to his professional duties at the cost of his friendship with Leo. The treacherous choices that Vincent and Guerrero make leave the game players with further questions related to police professional conduct and undercover operation ethics that may resemble real-life undercover operations.

## Discussion and Conclusion

We have shown how two prison-themed video games (*Deus Ex, Mankind Divided – A Criminal Past* and *A Way Out*) depict punishment, violence, criminal justice personnel, and construe matters of criminal justice in ways that shape how citizens understand these issues. Drawing from cultural criminology conceptualizations of how media shape public views of crime and responses to it (Phillips & Strobl, 2006; Rafter, 2001), we have argued that myths and stereotypes are reproduced in these video game representations and the entertainment industry broadly. To this end, we suggest these video games mirror what Sanders and Lyon (1995) call repetitive retribution, that is a popular culture tendency to blame, surveil, and punish prisoners and criminalized people that is reproduced in media (in this context, video games). The portrayals in the games suggest the people detained in prisons (regardless of their offence types) are deserving of punishment. Beyond the repetitive retribution glorified in these games, the entertainment value that focuses on experiencing thrills of escape and

violations of laws and sadness and deception, can also draw gamers' attention. Even though the entertainment value may compete with the representations of violence, myths, and stereotypes, there is a possibility these representations have an impact in the real world shaping gamers' perspectives about prisons and punishment (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019; Gabbiadini et al., 2016).

We have made a methodological contribution by building on previous studies, such as Hawreliak and Lemieux (2020), combining semiotic and discourse analysis to examine the visual, as well as the textual and verbal content of these video games. The result is a multimodal analysis of these games and the meanings conveyed during gameplay. In terms of an empirical contribution, the comparison of these two video games, *Deus Ex, Mankind Divided – A Criminal Past* and *A Way Out*, allows us to assess two major games in this field that have not been investigated fully yet in criminal justice literature and assess the prominent visual and discursive trends and patterns. We hope this analysis enriches not only video game studies, but also analyses of video games and popular culture in criminology and criminal justice studies. We have only examined two games, however future research could examine the extent to which similar games convey and replicate or perhaps deviate from the trends revealed here.

Myths and stereotypes regarding criminal justice continue to be conveyed and reproduced in criminal justice and prison-themed video games. This is a significant issue, given as Klimmt (2009) notes such video games can shape a sense of self and others. Video games can operate to define the self (Klimmt, 2009; Leonard, 2003) as we have seen in the representations of prisoner and officer subcultures shaping identities. These representations define what prison is or what being kept in the carceral means to game players, and reproduce either punitive or empathetic views (Hartmann, et al., 2010). This means that the content should be of specific interest not just to scholars in video game studies, but also to scholars aiming at achieving social justice. Following Parker et al. (2018), we contend that indie video games might be well-positioned to challenge some of these hegemonic or mythical views in video games produced by larger companies. We would also suggest larger companies should think about the politics and ethics of continuing to rely on myths and stereotypes in their video game storylines and representations, as these can shape our younger generation's mindsets and behaviors through cultural representations. To achieve social justice and erase stereotypes that continue to cause suffering for criminalized people, we must work collectively on the way we communicate with more empathetic awareness about the realities of imprisonment and punishment. Counter to the depictions of numerous conniving and treacherous behaviors of prisoners, correctional officers, prison administration, and police officers, the goal of working toward social justice requires the video gaming industry consider the politics and ethics of their work and the justice implications of representing criminalized people and the carceral.

## References

- Adkinson, C. (2008). The Amazing Spider-Man and the evolution of the comics code: A case study in cultural criminology. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 15(3), 241-261.
- Asimos, V. (2018). Playing the myth: Video games as contemporary mythology. *Implicit Religion* 21(1), 93-111.
- Bennett, J. (2018). Representations of prison escapes in films. In Martin, T. and G. Chantraine (eds). *Prison Breaks: Toward a Sociology of Escape*, London: Palgrave, pp. 265-290.
- Blackburn, G., & Scharrer, E. (2019). Video game playing and beliefs about masculinity among male and female emerging adults. *Sex Roles* 80(5-6), 310-324.
- Bosch, B. (2016). “Why So Serious?” Threat, authoritarianism, and depictions of crime, law, and order in Batman Films. *Criminology, Justice, Law & Society* 17(1), 37-54.
- Bowman, N., Bowen, D., Mercado, M., Resignato, L., & de Villemor Chauveau, P. (2022). “I did it without hesitation. Am I the bad guy?”: Online conversations in response to controversial in-game violence. *New Media & Society*, 14614448221078865.
- Burgess, M., Stermer, S., Burgess, S. (2007). Sex, lies and video games: The portrayal of male and female characters on video game covers. *Sex Roles* 57, 419-433.
- Clevenger, S. and B. Acquaviva. (2020). Hulk smash! Violence in *The Incredible Hulk* comics. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 20(1), 28-42.
- Cunningham, S., Engelstätter, B., & Ward, M. (2016). Violent video games and violent crime. *Southern Economic Journal* 82(4), 1247-1265.
- Cybulski, A. (2014). Enclosures at play: surveillance in the code and culture of videogames. *Surveillance & Society* 12(3), 427-432.
- Denham, J., & Spokes, M. (2021). The right to the virtual city: Rural retreatism in open-world video games. *New Media & Society* 23(6), 1567-1583.
- Denham, J., & Spokes, M. (2019). Thinking outside the ‘murder box’: Virtual violence and pro-social action in video games. *British Journal of Criminology* 59(3), 737-755.
- Denham, J., Hirschler, S., & Spokes, M. (2021). The reification of structural violence in video games. *Crime, Media, Culture* 17(1), 85-103.
- Dickerman, C., Christensen, J., & Kerl-McClain, S. (2008). Big breasts and bad guys: Depictions of gender and race in video games. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 3(1), 20-29.
- Downing, S., and Levan, K. (2016). Pains of imprisonment in a “lock em’ up” video game: Implications for a peacemaking discourse through new media experiences. *Contemporary Justice Review* 19, 142-162.
- Ferguson, C., & Colwell, J. (2020). Sexualised video games, sexist attitudes and empathy towards victims of rape: Correlational evidence for a relationship is minimal in an online study. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 30(1), 16-27.
- Ferguson, M., D. Madill, Piché, J. and K. Walby. (2017). ‘Everybody likes escape stories’: Exploring representations of prison escape in Canadian penal history museums. Chantraine, G. and T. Martin (eds). In *Prison Breaks: Towards a Sociology of Escape*. London: Palgrave. Pp 329-354.
- Ferrell, J., Hayward, K., and Young, J. (2008). *Cultural Criminology: An Invitation*. London: Sage.
- Fiddler, M. (2007). Projecting the prison: The depiction of the uncanny in *The Shawshank Redemption*. *Crime, Media, Culture* 3(2), 192-206.
- Gabbiadini, A., Riva, P., Andrighetto, L., Volpato, C., & Bushman, B. (2016). Acting like a tough guy: Violent-sexist video games, identification with game characters, masculine beliefs, & empathy for female violence victims. *PLoS ONE* 11(4): e0152121.

- Gee, J. (2008). Learning theory, video games, and popular culture. In Drotner, K. and S. Livingstone (eds), *The International Handbook of Children, Media, and Culture*, London: Sage, pp. 196-211.
- Granic, I., Lobel, A., & Engels, R. (2014). The benefits of playing video games. *American Psychologist* 69(1), 66-78.
- Harris, H., Nakamura, K., & Bucklen, K. (2018). Do cellmates matter? A causal test of the schools of crime hypothesis with implications for differential association and deterrence theories. *Criminology* 56(1), 87-122.
- Hartmann, T., Toz, E., & Brandon, M. (2010). Just a game? Unjustified virtual violence produces guilt in empathetic players. *Media Psychology* 13(4), 339-363.
- Hawreliak, J., & Lemieux, A. (2020). The semiotics of social justice: a multimodal approach to examining social justice issues in videogames. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 41(5), 723-739.
- Hope, A. (2016). World of Spycraft: video games, gamification and surveillance creep. In Taylor, E. and T. Rooney (eds). *Surveillance Futures: Social and Ethical Implications of New Technologies for Children and Young People*. London: Routledge, pp. 174-185.
- Ibsen, A. (2013). Ruling by favors: Prison guards' informal exercise of institutional control. *Law & Social Inquiry* 38(2), 342-363.
- Joh, E. (2009). Breaking the law to enforce it: Undercover police participation in crime. *Stanford Law Review* 62, 155-199.
- Kirkland, E. (2009). Masculinity in video games: The gendered gameplay of silent hill. *Camera Obscura* 24, 161-183.
- Klimmt, C., Hefner, D., & Vorderer, P. (2009). The video game experience as "true" identification: A theory of enjoyable alterations of players' self-perception. *Communication Theory* 19(4), 351-373.
- Kort-Butler, L. A. (2012). Rotten, vile, and depraved! Depictions of criminality in superhero cartoons. *Deviant Behavior* 33(7), 566-581.
- Leonard, D. (2003). Live in your world, play in ours: Race, video games, and consuming the other. *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 3(4), 1-9.
- Leonard, D. (2006). Not a hater, just keepin' it real: The importance of race-and gender-based game studies. *Games and Culture* 1(1), 83-88.
- Levan, K., Cesaroni, C., & Downing, S. (2020). (Mis) representations of prison: Gender-and prison-themed video games. *Games and Culture* 15(6), 653-669.
- Levan, K., & Downing, S. (2019). Virtual total control: Escaping a simulated prison. *Games and Culture* 14(1), 46-66.
- Marquart, J. (1986). Prison guards and the use of physical coercion as a mechanism of prisoner control. *Criminology* 24(2), 347-366.
- Marquart, J., & Roebuck, J. (1985). Prison guards and "snitches": deviance within a total institution. *British Journal of Criminology* 25(3), 217-233.
- Mason, P. (2006). Lies, distortion and what doesn't work: Monitoring prison stories in the British media. *Crime, Media, Culture* 2(3), 251-267.
- Matthews, R. (2020). New times, new crimes: Notes on the depillarization of the criminal justice system. *Critical Criminology* 28(3), 309-326.
- McCaffree, K., & Proctor, K. (2018). Cocooned from crime: The relationship between video games and crime. *Society* 55(1), 41-52.
- McKernan, B. (2015). The meaning of a game: Stereotypes, video game commentary and color-blind racism. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 3(2), 224-253.

- McClanahan, B. (2021). *Visual Criminology*. London: Policy Press.
- Mitchell, M., Fahmy, C., Pyrooz, D., & Decker, S. (2017). Criminal crews, codes, and contexts: Differences and similarities across the code of the street, convict code, street gangs, and prison gangs. *Deviant Behavior* 38(10), 1197-1222.
- Moran, D. (2012). Prisoner reintegration and the stigma of prison time inscribed on the body. *Punishment & Society* 14(5), 564-583.
- Murphy, B. (2020). Regulating undercover policing: Subjects, rights and governmentality. *Critical Criminology* 28(1), 65-84.
- Mussell, L., Walby, K. & J. Piché. (2023). 'Sadly, my group was 'hanged' at the end of the evening': The politics of deservingness and representation at carceral-themed escape rooms. *Leisure/Loisir*, forthcoming.
- Nie, H. (2013). Gaming, nationalism, and ideological work in contemporary China: Online games based on the war of resistance against Japan. *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(81), 499-517.
- O'Sullivan, S. (2001). Representations of prison in nineties Hollywood cinema: from *Con Air* to *The Shawshank Redemption*. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 40(4), 317-334.
- Oleszkiewicz, A., Kanonowicz, M., Sorokowski, P., & Sorokowska, A. (2018). Attitudes toward punishment and rehabilitation as perceived through playing a Prison Tycoon game. *Games and Culture* 13(4), 406-420.
- Parker, F., Whitson, J., & Simon, B. (2018). Megabooth: The cultural intermediation of indie games. *New Media & Society* 20(5), 1953-1972.
- Pérez-Latorre, Ó., Oliva, M., & Besalú, R. (2017). Videogame analysis: a social-semiotic approach. *Social Semiotics* 27(5), 586-603.
- Phillips, N., & Strobl, S. (2006). Cultural criminology and kryptonite: Apocalyptic and retributive constructions of crime and justice in comic books. *Crime, Media, Culture* 2(3), 304-331.
- Piittinen, S. (2018). Morality in Let's Play narrations: Moral evaluations of Gothic monsters in gameplay videos of *Fallout 3*. *New Media & Society* 20(12), 4671-4688.
- Pyrooz, D., Mitchell, M., Moule Jr, R., & Decker, S. (2021). Look who's talking: the snitching paradox in a representative sample of prisoners. *British Journal of Criminology* 61(4), 1145-1167.
- Rafter, N. (2001). American criminal trial films: An overview of their development, 1930-2000. *Journal of Law and Society* 28(1), 9-24.
- Rhodes, L. (2007). Supermax as a technology of punishment. *Social Research* 74(2), 547-567.
- Ricordeau, G. 2018. Prison, jailbreaks, and escapees in two popular TV series: *The Prisoner* and *Prison Break*. In Martin, T. and G. Chantraine (eds). *Prison Breaks: Toward a Sociology of Escape*, London: Palgrave, pp. 291-310.
- Robinson, N. (2015). Have you won the war on terror? Military videogames and the state of American exceptionalism. *Millennium* 43(2), 450-470.
- Roth, C., Van Nuenen, T., & Koenitz, H. (2018, December). Ludonarrative hermeneutics: *A Way Out* and the narrative paradox. In *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. Cham: Springer, pp. 93-106.
- Salter, M. (2011). The geographical imaginations of video games: Diplomacy, civilization, America's Army and Grand Theft Auto IV. *Geopolitics* 16(2), 359-388.
- Sanders, C., & Lyon, E. (1995). Repetitive retribution: Media images and the cultural construction of criminal justice. In Ferrell, J. & C. Sanders (eds). *Cultural Criminology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, pp. 25-44.
- Schlembach, R. (2018). Undercover policing and the spectre of 'domestic extremism': the covert surveillance of environmental activism in Britain. *Social Movement Studies* 17(5), 491-506.

- Selepak, A. (2010). Skinhead super Mario brothers: An examination of racist and violent games on white supremacist web sites. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 17(1), 1-47.
- Spokes, M. (2020). *Gaming and the Virtual Sublime: Rhetoric, Awe, Fear, and Death in Contemporary Video Games*. London: Emerald.
- Squire, K. (2006). From content to context: Videogames as designed experience. *Educational Researcher* 35(8), 19-29.
- Steinmetz, K. & Henderson, H. (2016). Hip-hop's criminological thought: A content analysis. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 18(1), 114-131.
- Stoddart, M. C. (2006). "They say it'll kill me... but they won't say when!" Drug Narratives in Comic Books. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 13(2), 66-95.
- Tardini, S., & Cantoni, L. (2005, June). A semiotic approach to online communities: Belonging, interest and identity in websites' and video games' communities. In *Proceedings of the IADIS International Conference e-Society*, pp. 371-378.
- Weinrath, M. (2016). *Behind the Walls: Inmates and Correctional Officers on the State of Canadian Prisons*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Whitson, J. (2019). The new spirit of capitalism in the game industry. *Television & New Media* 20(8), 789-801.
- Whitson, J., & Simon, B. (2014). Game studies meets surveillance studies at the edge of digital culture: An introduction to a special issue on surveillance, games and play. *Surveillance & Society* 12(3), 309-319.
- Wolf, M. (2011). Theorizing navigable space in video games. *Digarec Series* (6), 18-49.
- Wolfinger, N. (2002). On writing fieldnotes: Collection strategies and background expectancies. *Qualitative Research* 2(1), 85-93.
- Young, J. (2004). Voodoo criminology and the numbers game. In Ferrell, J., Hayward, K., Morrisson, W. and Presdee, M. (eds) *Cultural Criminology Unleashed*. London: The Glass House Press, pp. 13-27.