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Virtual Badges, Virtual Bullets: Law Enforcement Themes in Video Games

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Abstract

Despite law enforcement being a visible presence in both the community and various forms of media, there is little research that specifically focuses on law enforcement depictions in video games. Exploring law enforcement depictions in five popular video games, gameplay themes are categorized into pre-determined categories. Themes explored herein include: heroism, special attributes, routine tasks and decisions, incompetence, corruption, racism, sexism, anti-LGBTQ sentiments, police use of force, civil liberties, alcohol and substance use, and issues with relationships. Ultimately, the role of the playable character matters in expression of these themes, as well as the agency players have on character customization and gameplay. Limitations and considerations for future studies are discussed.

Keywords: video games, law enforcement, policing

Introduction

Law enforcement officers (LEOs) have been referred to as “our most visible symbols of justice” (Kappeler & Potter, 2018, p. 272). In comparison with other facets of criminal justice, such as institutional corrections, policing receives a disproportionate share of news coverage (see Sacco, 2006). Other forms of media, including films, television, and video games also depict police, with widely ranging portrayals.

These depictions vary from engaging in dangerous and heroic work to misconduct and unwarranted violence (see e.g. Rafter, 2006; Surette, 2015; Kappeler & Potter, 2018; Levan & Downing, 2022; Steinmetz & Petkovsek, 2023). Those labeled as reality shows further these narratives by encouraging audience participation in a way that Surette (2015) describes as “[a]nalagous to video games” (p. 110). In consideration of the media “loop” discussed by Ferrell, Hayward, and Young (2015), researchers should explore the specific portrayals of LEOs in video game environments, as these loops may help explain both the way law enforcement is portrayed, and whether individuals mimic behaviors by and toward law enforcement that they view from video games in real life (pp. 155-157).

Video Games and Law Enforcement

Few studies specifically focus on depictions of law enforcement in video games. While there is discussion on law enforcement at the intersection of another primary topic, such as race, ethnicity, and/or violence (see e.g. Miller, 2008; Leonard, 2009), to the knowledge of the author, few have undertaken the task of exclusively exploring these themes, a shortcoming addressed elsewhere (see Levan & Downing, 2022; Steinmetz & Petkovsek, 2023). Steinmetz and Petkovsek (2023) offer a compelling examination of the competing images of “stalwart” versus “fallible” officers in the *Resident Evil* series (pp. 166-170). Levan and Downing (2022) provide an overview of law enforcement depictions in video games, though specific games are not explored in depth.

Given the presence of law enforcement as both playable characters and non-playable characters (NPCs) in video games, there is a striking lack of research on this topic. Herein, the discussion will focus on specific themes and how those themes are presented in a sample of video games. The games included have been researched to varying degrees. Perhaps due to its controversial place in modern society, the *Grand Theft Auto* series has been highly studied and scrutinized (see Markey & Ferguson, 2017). Capitalism (e.g. Denham, Hirschler, & Spokes, 2021), sex work (e.g. Mortenson, 2006; Hoffin & Lee-Treweek, 2020), portrayals of race and ethnicity (e.g. Leonard, 2006; DeVane & Squire, 2008; Miller, 2008; Leonard, 2009; Polasek, 2014) and portrayals of LGBTQ characters (e.g. Colliver, 2020) are a few examples of themes from this series discussed elsewhere, though law enforcement depictions are often not central to these discussions. Similarly, the *Red Dead Redemption* series has been examined in terms of its colonialism and American frontier themes (Razzi, 2021; Wright, 2021), as well as its contributions to “Latin American ludology” with “the figurative luchador” (Penix-Tadsen, 2013, p. 184). As *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut* is a newer release, the academic research is scant, though Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Hejná (2022) discuss game and character dialect and how this can be used to convey issues such as social status, race, and ethnicity.

The Current Study

Five games were chosen from the Internet Movie Database’s list of the top fifty crime-based video games, as listed in 2021 (“Top 50 Crime Video Games”). Games were selected based on the presence of law enforcement themes within the game, as well as game availability (i.e. a convenience sample). The five games selected, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games, 2010), *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2019), and

Disco Elysium: The Final Cut (ZA/UM, 2019), were then divvied up between a team of undergraduate students, each assigned a single game to conduct a thorough play through and organize gameplay into pre-determined categories. For interrater reliability, the primary researcher also reviewed play through videos available for each game on YouTube. Throughout, where specific scenes have been included from videos, additional citations are included. Where necessary, categories and/or subcategories have been collapsed or omitted for purposes of discussion, and for the sake of parsimoniousness, not all content is included.

Table: Game Descriptions

Game/Year Released	Brief Game Description	Player Perspective
Disco Elysium: The Final Cut (2019)	Waking with no memory, Harry, along with his partner Kim Kitsuragi are tasked with investigating crimes in Revachol. Other notable characters include Klaasje Amandou, the Hardie Boys, Cuno and Cunoesse, and Evrart Clare. (“Disco Elysium”)	Harrier “Harry” Du Bois, Detective (“Disco Elysium”)
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (2004)	CJ returns to San Andreas after his mother’s murder. To prevent being framed for murder, he is tasked to complete missions by corrupt police officers (Rockstar Games website, as quoted on “Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas”). Other notable characters include “Sweet”, “Big Smoke”, Officer Tenpenney, Officer Pulaski, and Mike Toreno (“Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas”).	CJ (Carl Johnson) (“Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas”)
Grand Theft Auto V (2013)	Three men must work together to navigate institutions, such as criminal networks and the government, to commit crimes as a team (Steam, as cited on “Grand Theft Auto V”).	Michael De Santa, Franklin Clinton, and Trevor Phillips (“Grand Theft Auto V”)

Red Dead Redemption (2010)	Set in 1911, John Marston, former member of the Van der Linde gang, must find his former gang members to be reunited with his family. Other notable characters include Bonnie MacFarlane, Abigail Marston, Jack Marston, Marshal Johnson, Colonel Allende, Vincente de Santa, Dutch Van der Linde (“Red Dead Redemption”)	John Marston (former outlaw gang member)
Red Dead Redemption 2 (2019)	Prequel to Red Dead Redemption, taking place in 1899. Shows the Van der Linde gang (including Arthur Morgan, Dutch Van der Linde, John Marston, and Micah Bell) as the Pinkertons, law enforcement, and rival gangs seek them out. (“Red Dead Redemption 2”)	Arthur Morgan, member of the Van der Linde gang

The categories created for this study are based, in part, on prior research conducted by Donovan and Klahm (2015), who focus on portrayals of law enforcement in crime dramas including presence and type of force used, whether force could be deemed necessary, suspect demeanor, and instances of other misconduct. In addition, other themes identified by Rafter (2006), Surette (2015), Kappeler and Potter (2018), and Levan and Downing (2022) are included.

Law Enforcement Themes

Heroism

Heroism may be interpreted depending on its portrayal in the media. For instance, Rafter (2006) differentiates between “official heroes,” who represent stereotypical “law abiding behavior” (p. 196), “outlaw heroes,” allowing for crime commission (p. 196), and “criminal heroes” motifs, which “stress the heroes’ break with lawful society and their self-acceptance as offenders” (p. 199). Throughout these games, there are multiple references to LEOs as portraying the roles of heroes in these various iterations. In *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), Garte, the cafeteria manager refers to Harry’s heroism in a dismissive manner. In both *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games, 2010 and 2019) games, there are multiple examples of acts of heroism, many of which would be classified as “outlaw heroism,” (Rafter, 2006, p. 196) as they are often conducted by John Marston and Arthur Morgan, fulfilling various roles including bounty hunters, outlaw gang members, and makeshift deputies. However, in the *RDR* series the boundaries between law enforcement, bounty hunters, and citizenry are imprecise. The *GTA* games (Rockstar Games, 2004 and 2013) do not typically portray LEOs as

heroic; in fact, the characters emerging from criminogenic backgrounds are often the ones who are demonstratively heroic. Heroism has qualitatively different meanings across games, depending on whether players are in the role of officers, other agents, or as non-officer roles. These acts of heroism are further delineated as those involving jobs with elevated levels of danger, sometimes including fatal violence (see also discussion in Levan & Downing, 2022).

Risky Jobs and Fatal Violence

The degree of risk associated with law enforcement duties and responsibilities has been debated elsewhere. Kappeler and Potter (2018) challenge the notion that the daily expectations of an officer herald significant risk. In *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), there are tasks that entail risk beyond expectations of investigations. Harry engages in actions such as physical altercations and verbal confrontations. Kitsuragi, noting the quality of gear worn on a corpse during an investigation, says, “We’ve requested similar material for our tactical units for years now. The Constabulary’s deemed it too costly. In that time, we’ve lost six men to semi-automatics.” (Indie James, Part 2, 2021, 4:59). This quote illustrates officers may seek protection from fatalistic threats. In addition to multiple encounters with armed or otherwise dangerous citizens, Harry is also exposed to otherworldly dangers, such as a giant potentially poisonous insect (Indie James, Part 19, 2021). As such, these encounters are framed in ways in which players are situated as the mortal protagonist against potentially supernatural villains (see Levan & Downing, 2022; Steinmetz & Petkovsek, 2023).

In *RDR* (Rockstar Games, 2010) there are shootouts between the characters, such as when taking in individuals for questioning, saving hostages, and engaging in what might otherwise be routinized tasks. Marston is often in dangerous situations, such as single-handedly taking on guards on a train, or joining posses at the request of the Marshal to capture bandits, only to be met with gunfire. While these duties may seem routine for an officer of the time, Marston is actually a former member of the Van der Linde gang, whose family has been taken until he leads law enforcement to his former gang members. Similarly woven throughout the story in *RDR2* (Rockstar Games, 2019) are instances of law enforcement stopping train robberies in progress and transporting individuals to jail. In one danger-filled scene, representatives from the Pinkerton Detective Agency arrive to the gang’s hideout to arrest them, and the Van der Linde gang exchanges gunfire with them (Game Army, 2018, 7:19:03).

In the *GTA* (Rockstar Games, 2004 and 2013) games examined herein, police do not maintain a place of heroism and therefore are less likely to be shown completing benevolently risky tasks. In *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), police are at risk of injury or death. In “End of the Line”, after police corruption has been exposed, CJ chases Tenpenney, exchanging gunfire with other squad cars and forcing him off the road (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 11:02:44). The game also provides multiple opportunities for CJ to potentially kill LEOs, sometimes as part of quest completion.

In *GTA V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), players are instructed to “Take out the cops before getting to the rendezvous point” in the armored truck while completing “The Jewel Store Job Mission” (GTA Series Videos, 2022, 2:21:53). After the robbery in “The Big Score,” there is a police chase and shoot-out with responding officers (Rockstar Games, 2013). As these examples illustrate, progression of the storyline is sometimes dependent on killing LEOs. When officers arrive to crimes in progress, they often have fatal violence perpetrated against them, such as when Franklin, Trevor, and Michael commit robberies and must escape pursuing officers.

Special Attributes

Some members of the public may view LEOs as having unique skills or abilities, which may partially stem from media exposure. For instance, Donovan and Klahm (2015) found that crime dramas portray police as exceptional crime-solvers with few errors in their investigations. Video games also often portray law enforcement with special skills or attributes (see discussion in Levan & Downing, 2022). Of the games included, *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) has the greatest ability for players to customize the playable character, Harry, building his attributes in various manners. Access to the “encyclopedia” provides additional knowledge to the player, while attributes such as “Perception” allows for options such as for Harry to note footprints left in mud and connect them with suspects (Indie James, Part 8, 2021, 28:00) and “Visual Calculus” enables Harry to complete tasks such as figuring the shooting perspective used (Indie James, Part 10, 2021, 24:44). Overall, the various tools at Harry’s disposal allow for a range of attributes that assist in completion of solving cases and progressing the storyline.

Because the *RDR* game series is different temporally than others considered here, some skills are differentially considered as well. Herding cattle may not be as useful for modern police working in urban areas, but it is a skill that players will find helpful. Similarly, in both games, players can specifically focus on targets while aiming their firearm to improve their accuracy. In *RDR2*, Arthur notes “Before, put enough time and distance between you and the problem...” (Rockstar Games, 2019). This may be illustrative of the expanded reach of law enforcement agencies.

Routine Tasks and Decisions

Law enforcement duties often rely on a decision-making process, no matter the level of mundanity or excitement involved in the task. Despite being portrayed as “crime fight[ers]” in the mainstream media, “[p]olice spend a considerable part of their time on very routine tasks” (Kappeler & Potter, 2018, p. 272). In the games explored here, characters complete a range of duties to move a storyline forward (also see discussion in Levan & Downing, 2022). In *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), officers make daily decisions and engage in routine tasks, including collecting evidence and interviewing witnesses and suspects. Harry also maintains a task journal within the game mechanics that can be referenced by the player. As a role-playing game (RPG), *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) is built on decision making opportunities, some of which impact the outcome of the game. Often seemingly innocuous options in a decision-making process have various and potentially significant in-game consequences.

In *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), rather than completing tasks, law enforcement often prevent rule-breaking from characters. This may create a feeling of omnipresence of police, even when there is little interaction with them. Police radios are often audible even when officers are not visible. Both *GTA* games (Rockstar Games, 2004 and 2013) examined here show officers conducting routine tasks such as patrolling.

Patrols in the *RDR* series (Rockstar Games, 2010 and 2019) are loosely defined, often as horse patrols. The first in the series, for instance, includes a form of patrol by Marston to monitor the safety of Bonnie’s livestock (Rockstar Games, 2010). In *RDR2* (Rockstar Games 2019), it includes patrols around jails and may be by LEOs or bounty hunters. Additionally, when engaging in deputy responsibilities, Arthur’s ability to draw his firearm in town is limited. The parameters of routinization within these games are defined both by the status of the playable character and the timeframe in which the games are set.

Incompetent Law Enforcement

Surette (2015) explains the long history of police depicted as “lampooned” in media, often utilizing humor to illustrate incompetence in completing their duties (p. 102). Video games similarly may portray law

enforcement as inept (see Levan & Downing, 2022). Regardless of the player's role in each game, it is evident that many NPCs have negative perceptions toward LEOs, particularly with respect to their ability to fulfill their job responsibilities. In *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), inadequacy of the detectives is often correlated with other problematic behaviors, such as drinking to excess. Harry spends a substantial amount of time in the game searching for his firearm and badge, essential items for completion of law enforcement tasks. As noted by Klaasje, citizens may view police as inept as she notes, "Don't be so harsh on yourself. They let almost anyone be a police officer." (Indie James Part 1, 2021, 13:10). Similar sentiments are later reiterated by Cuno upon discovery there is only one gun between Harry and Kitsuragi, as he declares, "This is the sorriest pair of pigs Cuno's ever seen." (Indie James, Part 2, 2021, 20:25). Much of the citizenry perceive law enforcement in a negative light, as evidenced by the above examples.

In the side mission "American Appetites" in *RDR* (Rockstar Games, 2010), there are multiple references to incompetent law enforcement made by citizens when their loved ones go missing. When Marston asks whether they have sought help, replies indicate feelings of frustration toward inadequate policing practices, including: "They can't even help themselves" (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 9:34:17), "About as much as you'd expect. Made me fill out a form" (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 9:37:00), and "These bastards won't do anything" (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 9:37:36). These responses are indicative of the frustrations of those who feel caught in the routinization of police work and a lack of action against those committing heinous crimes against their loved ones.

In *RDR2* (Rockstar Games, 2019), there are multiple instances of prisoners or detainees escaping. At one point during the game, all the detainees in a wagon escape and catch a passing train when the group stops to talk to law enforcement (Game Army 2018, 3:28:53). When discussing issues related to bounties, Dutch notes, "There's been a price on my head for thirteen years... it'll take 'em months to find us down here and it seems like we can have a little sport." (Game Army 2018, 3:34:16). The confidence in law enforcement appears to be weak, as they continue to fall short of their expectations from the citizenry.

Police may be judged by their responses to citizens, as well as their response times. The response time in *GTA* (Rockstar Games, 2004 and 2013) between crime commission and police arrival is often lengthy. For instance, in *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004) after spending quite a bit of time shooting at the Vagos on top of the train, Smoke notes they should vacate before the police arrive (*GTA Series Videos*, 2021, 1:30:15). Other times, crimes are committed with no acknowledgement from officers at all, such as when CJ and his friends acquire fast food and exchange gunfire with another car (*GTA Series Videos*, 2021). As seen in this analysis, and as noted by Leonard (2009), police are selective in their crime intervention efforts, which may speak to incompetence, but also to the potential for selective enforcement within the game. In *GTA V* (Rockstar Games, 2013) and in *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), main characters can steal police cars or motorcycles, sometimes while the officer is within sight of it. In *GTA 5*, there are numerous examples where the trio easily evades police, including after the FIB building break in, where they escape in a paramedic vehicle and effortlessly pass through a road block (*GTA Series Videos*, 2022, 11:47:37)

Corruption

One of the narratives Surette (2015) discusses common to police films is that of the "corrupt cop," in which LEOs become part of the criminogenic element (p. 107). Games are also a source of dialogue for the issue of potential corruption (see Levan & Downing, 2022). Since *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) is a game built on choice, many options allow the player to choose whether to engage in corrupt actions. For instance, opportunities for theft present themselves throughout the game such as with options to steal medicine from others (e.g. Indie James Part 1, 2021, 23:49) or the boots from the hanging man's corpse (Indie James Part 5, 2021, 22:40). Harry also has options to accept remuneration from Evrart Claire. Multiple times, Evrart offers

compensation, including money simply for being “a real team player” (Indie James, Part 4, 2021, 53:35), or requesting that Harry and Kitsuragi “open a *little* door” in exchange for information on the “Hanged Man” (Indie James, Part 4, 2021, 25:47). Options where corruption is a choice may result in some form of gain to the player.

In *RDR* (Rockstar Games, 2010), Marshal Johnson tells Marston about his struggles with being potentially tempted by corruption, noting, “I got the railway, the people who pay my salary trying to get me to turn a blind eye to them burning down settlements up there...” (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 36:06). In this quote, which continues beyond this snippet, Marshal Johnson is explaining the difficulties of his multifaceted job as it includes numerous opportunities for corruptibility. Toward the conclusion of the game, Dutch says “When I’m gone, they’ll just find another monster. They have to because they have to justify their wages.” (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 7:59:05). Dutch may be enumerating the consequences of an us versus them mentality, which ushers in corrupt law enforcement who define outlaws for remuneration. In *RDR 2* (Rockstar Games, 2019), Sheriff Gray allows his family members to violate the law without repercussions, while enforcing it against others. Agent Milton tells Arthur that if he brings in Dutch, in exchange he will avoid execution (Game Army 2018, 2:53:20). These games present struggles of corruption viewed through a historical lens, and through an intersection of corruption involving networks of law enforcement, outlaws, and bounty hunters.

The *GTA* series is notable for portrayals of pitting often corrupt LEOs against the citizenry. This is demonstrated in the beginning of *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004) when Tenpenney provides an ultimatum for CJ to work for him or otherwise be framed for the murder of another officer. Throughout the game, he tasks CJ with multiple missions, including murder and destruction of evidence. CJ has multiple discussions with officers threatening him to engage in immoral and illegal activities on their behalf. With threats such as when Tenpenney calls CJ and says, “You’re not busy unless you’re doing something for us, you understand?” (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 1:53:13), CJ is constantly reminded that LEOs have practically unchecked power over him. When the news announces Pulaski and Tenpenney were charged with multiple crimes, but that charges are dropped, this creates concerns over rioting. One speculation is “cops always get off easy” (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 10:31:10), insinuating that police use their positions of power to evade punishment. While Tenpenney is dying after the chase with CJ, he says “Fifty of me and this town would be okay. I took the trash out! I DID! And I’d do it all again...” (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 11:10:13). Even while dying, Tenpenney justifies his corrupt actions.

In *GTA 5* (Rockstar Games, 2013), the main characters work closely with law enforcement, often to complete a corrupt mission. In exchange for their assistance, Dave Norton, FIB Agent, agrees to erase the past histories for Michael, Trevor, and Franklin. Dave also explains, “...we’re corrupt in a good way” (GTA Series Videos, 2022, 6:12:49), acknowledging corruption, but rationalizing their actions. When the group triggers an alarm at a bank, they note the response from police is disproportionate to what might normally be dispatched, one noting, “Bad cops guarding dirty money...” (GTA Series Videos, 2022, 8:11:04). In both *GTA* games included in this inquiry, there are numerous examples of corruption. Given they are not depicted as the protagonists in these games, it seems intuitive that law enforcement play quintessential antagonistic roles.

Depictions of Racism

In crime dramas and reality shows, offenders are often disproportionately portrayed as white (Oliver, 1994; Donovan & Klahm 2015) and LEOs are typically white in reality-crime shows (Oliver, 1994). However, some studies indicate news media are more likely to highlight Black male offenders (Dixon, 2009, as cited in Pollock, Tapia, and Sibila, 2022). (For a general discussion of portrayals of race and law enforcement in video games, see Levan & Downing, 2022). *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) incorporates multiple discussions of race

and racism throughout the game. There is even a character, referred to as “the Racist Lorry Driver,” who has an encounter with Kitsuragi. Kitsuragi responds by stating, “You think my *kind* doesn’t belong here. That I should *watch myself* and *behave*” (Indie James Part 5, 2021, 6:06). At one point, Harry finds a broken mug “with an oddly racist depiction of *the yellow man* frolicking in saffron” (Indie James Part 1, 2021, 51:07). Undertones of race and racism, such as these, play a role as Harry and Kitsuragi navigate the citizenry to conduct investigations.

In *RDR* (Rockstar Games, 2010), Bonnie MacFarlane and Marston have a discussion, referencing “Indians” and “white trash” (RabidRetrospectGames 2016, 1:41:55), demonizing individuals who belong to these groups. When Marston is in Mexico, he meets up with three men who demand some of his items of clothing. Though this demeaning treatment is demonstrative of their treatment by white people, Marston shoots and leaves the men the dead in square. Indigenous People are also treated in degrading ways, such as being referred to by multiple characters, including Professor McDougall, as “savages” (see e.g. RabidRetrospectGames 2016, 7:34:44). When Nastas (an Indigenous Person) is taken to Professor McDougall, Ross notes “I just can’t communicate with them” (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 6:51:38). Although all these interactions are not centered around law enforcement themes, they serve as an explanatory backdrop for other instances involving racist, problematic, and abusive treatment.

There are similar uses of derogatory language in *RDR2* (Rockstar Games, 2019). When making sleeping arrangements, one character expresses displeasure in sleeping near “a bunch of darkies” (Game Army, 2018, 21:03). Similarly to discussions in the first installment, Indigenous People, in particular, are referred to in derogatory ways, as law enforcement justify their homicides for purposes of civilization.

Racism and racial stereotypes are rampant in *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004). Officers refer to characters as “greaseball bastard,” “stupid Mexican,” “vato asshole,” (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 3:17 and 9:13:43) and multiple officers refer to CJ and his friends as “boy” (see e.g. GTA Series Videos, 2021, 22:18 and 1:04:19). Characters of color are often portrayed as either gang members or criminals, immersed in a world of drugs and violence. Even the primary LEO who is engaging in the most severe forms of brutality and corruption, Frank Tenpenney, is a Black officer (although he is partnered with Pulaski, a white officer).

In *GTA V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), there is a relevant discussion of law enforcement and racism. One law enforcement employee makes multiple references such as, “I mean, there’s some bad apples in the department, but any accusation of a racist culture are...” and “We do community outreach. We have minority quotas” (GTA Series Videos, 2022, 7:12:14) This discussion specifically references the “bad apples” theory of law enforcement, relying on ideals of hiring to somehow offset inappropriate treatment.

Depictions of Sexism

Given the historically masculinized environment present in both law enforcements (see e.g. Morash & Haarr, 1995; and Workman-Stark, 2015) and gaming environments (see e.g. Shaw, 2014), sexist language and behaviors in games with criminal justice themes is to be expected. Law enforcement films have historically defined, and subsequently questioned, issues related to masculinity (Rafter, 2006). Characteristics such as discipline, toughness, sex appeal, and bravery are potential characteristics of the masculine identity of the law enforcement agent (Rafter, 2006).

As illustrated in *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), at the beginning of the game Harry, finding himself hung over and in a strange place, and enters the bathroom, with the game narration noting, “In a fierce discharge of masculine energy someone has ripped half the faucet off” (Indie James, Part 1, 2021, 8:52). The masculinized violence apparent in the aftermath of Harry’s violent outburst is recounted by Klaasje as “[a] real destructathon” (Indie James, Part 1, 2021, 16:31). Sexist actions and language are common in *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), much of it directed at Klaasje, as she is referred to by several characters as a “whore” (e.g.

Indie James, Part 9, 2021, 53:12). When Harry and Kitsuragi interview her about her sexual assault victimization, she notes "...they'll have to get someone more... [r]apeable" (Indie James, Part 9, 2021, 22:08), dismissing her own experiences, likely due to how her victimization is perceived by others. Klaasje is treated by many male NPCs as both sexualized and unimportant throughout the course of the game.

Given the time periods in which the games are set, it is also no surprise that there is sexist language in the *RDR* series. When Marston is driving around with Bonnie MacFarlane, he notes "I just know there are two theories to arguin' with women. And neither one works" (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 30:04). Perhaps to display her toughness and independence, Bonnie shows her own forms of bias in how she reacts toward men in general, and Marston more specifically. Constant undertones of gendered tension appear throughout the game between characters, often disguised as friendly banter. The language used toward Marston's wife, in contrast, is often more malicious in nature, such as when Archer says, "...you can always send your wife back out to work. I hear she works hard." (Rockstar Games, 2010). Additionally, characters such as Colonel Allende (who is portrayed as a blatant womanizer), and Reyes (who belittles a woman who is in love with him because of her lack of status), objectify women. Some of these behaviors emanate from the portrayals of Mexican characters in the game, indicating an intersectionality of both gender and ethnicity with these particular depictions.

Similar sexist themes are found in *RDR2* (Rockstar Games, 2019). While women are often shielded from much of the violence throughout the storyline, there are some exceptions. The men do not shy away from making inappropriate comments toward women. When Sadie shoots attempted robbers from their carriage, Arthur remarks to her "A new pair of pants and you think you're Landon Ricketts" (Game Army 2018, 3:40:36), implying that women are not as suited to engage in self-defense.

The objectification of women in *GTA* is noteworthy. In *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), as CJ kills Pulaski and asks for his last requests, Pulaski makes a crude sexual remark about his sister (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 9:15:15). Throughout, men refer to women with derogatory language and treat them aggressively. In considering stereotypical hypermasculine LEOs, Frank Tenpenney is an exemplar, whose relationship with CJ and his storyline within the game, are deeply rooted in his reliance on threats and violence. In addition to portrayals of solidly masculine characters, these games also provide blatant examples of sexism, often generated by the officers.

Anti-LGBTQ Behaviors and Language

In part because of the reliance of masculine ideologies, media focused on law enforcement have historically enforced anti-LGBTQ tropes, often through attempts at humor (Rafter, 2006). Rafter (2006) notes that: "Cop action films, then, open up space for a sexuality that is neither straight nor queer nor bisexual but intense, playful, and powerful. King [1999] terms it 'sodomite slaughter'" (p. 129). Hence, it may be that these media spaces allow for discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity, even though they are often intended as either humorous or overtly violent.

Discussions of LGBTQ issues are prevalent in the games under consideration. There are several discussions involving anti-LGBTQ sentiments and behaviors in *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019). The youths, Cuno and Cunoesse, use homophobic slurs throughout the game, often directed at Harry and Kitsuragi, including while they are engaged in investigative duties. Additionally, when Harry defends Kitsuragi against the Racist Lorry Driver, his response is "You two make a cute couple, you know that?" (Indie James, Part 5, 2021, 6:45), mocking the men's working partnership and friendship, as though close relationships between men cannot exist without questioning their sexuality. While LGBTQ issues are not the primary storyline, they are prominently addressed, with many of the derogatory comments made by characters intended to be unlikable.

Throughout the *RDR* series there are few such references. However, one notable discussion occurs between Marston and Reyes in *RDR* (Rockstar Games, 2010). When Reyes asks Marston why he is there, Marston replies:

Marston: I'm here for two men, and that's it.

Reyes: You have been spending too much time with Captain DeSanta.

Marston: Very funny. Not like that. I'll explain later. (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 5:26:02)

Placed as banter between the two characters during the game sequence, this exchange is one example of how sexual orientation may be used mockingly, similarly to Rafter's (2006) description of films engaging in humor-driven discussions.

In *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), when the characters arrive at Freddy's house, he says "...you got the wrong idea, man – that was just a prison thing..." (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 1:19:06). Similarly, after CJ's brother is sent to prison, Pulaski asks, "I wonder how your brother's sleeping, curled up next to his shower daddy while you live comfortably on the outside?" (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 4:59:47). Both are references to situational homosexuality that may occur in prison (see e.g. Eigenberg, 1992).

Police Force

While some force may be viewed as necessary and justified, other times it may be considered excessive. Force, often used as a mechanism to create drama and excitement in television shows, may be shown as verbal or physical and may include use of a firearm (Donovan & Klahm, 2015). In police oriented films in particular, white officers are often shown as perpetrated force against suspects (see Wilson, Schaefer, Blackburn, & Henderson, 2019). Police use of force, including brutality, may be included as a theme in game play as well (see e.g. Levan & Downing, 2022). In *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), force is used, though it may be illustrated as necessary. However, as an RPG this game presents the type of responses Harry provides as choices, so often players are not often required to engage in violence. Of note, the public seem to indicate a general fear toward the police. Cunoesse calls out, "Help! Pig's got Cuno! Help! RAPE!" (Indie James, Part 2, 2021, 33:16), perhaps out of preconceived fears of police violence. Harry often relies on verbal commands, but also may be presented with various choices. At one point, Harry has the option to engage with the leader of the Hardie Boys during questioning in various ways, ranging from routine questions to using physically aggressive actions, or leaving the scene altogether (Indie James, Part 8, 2021, 12:17).

In *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), Tenpenney and Pulaski use verbal and physical force, particularly against CJ. Tenpenney places a bag over his head while CJ is in the back of the police car as Pulaski holds a gun against his head (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 2:44:30). Another sequence shows Tenpenney punching him in the stomach with enough force that he falls to the ground (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 9:02:00). There are other examples, such as when police arrive to check a DA's car, engaging in physical violence and conducting a search (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 3:57:19)

Similar acts are shown in *GTA V* (Rockstar Games, 2013). An agent, with a man bound, says, "Next I'll have this thing so far up your ass, your tonsils will be playing shadow puppets. You think we can't do that? We can. It's in our guidelines" (GTA Series Videos, 2022, 4:16:00). Illustrative of engaging in brutality to extract information, she continues with physical and verbal aggression.

Given the setting in the *RDR* series, many of the methods utilized to contend with suspected offenders would be considered unorthodox or crossing the line into brutality in modern police forces. Hogtying, physically abusing, and killing detainees are all committed at the hands of bounty hunters and law enforcement.

In *RDR* (Rockstar Games, 2010), a deputy draws his gun on Marston when he discovers he is from Fort Mercer and may be “one of them Williamson boys” (RabidRetrospectGames, 2016, 34:00), exemplifying the tension the group has brought to the town, as well as the lengths law enforcement will go upon discovering them. In *RDR 2* (Rockstar Games, 2019), Sean is seen receiving “a decent kicking” from bounty hunters (Game Army, 2018, 2:27:58), and a person of color is subjected to physical abuse and potential homicide in Saint Denis, despite his surrender after committing a theft (Rockstar Games, 2019). Law enforcement within these games are portrayed as engaging in physical force, particularly against those suspected of crimes.

Necessity of force

Whether such force is necessary is another issue altogether. Terms such as “necessary and sufficient” (Donovan & Klahm, 2015, 1267) take on different meanings in terms of quest completion and advancing a game’s storyline than for LEOs in the real world. Some form of force is considered necessary for some missions in *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019). There are also options to engage in side quests for remuneration that involve force, such as knocking individuals unconscious and taking their money or belongings.

In the Wild West, force and violence are relied on, particularly through use of firearms against others. In both *RDR* games, the primary characters rely on force to accomplish tasks from completion of crimes to saving loved ones. One example is in *RDR2* (Rockstar Games, 2019) when Leviticus Cornwall and his men are holding both Marston and Strauss, of the Van der Linde gang, hostage, prompting a shootout (Game Army, 2018, 3:16:40). Also, characters use threats of “gelding” a rival gang member for information (Rockstar Games, 2019), which the characters may view as necessary, though players may perceive this as violating civil liberties under modern standards. In both games, compliance of citizens is an issue, perhaps stemming from abuse, brutality, and general mistreatment of suspects.

Civil Liberties

Throughout *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), there are multiple examples of civil liberties not being fully respected. Doors are broken down, windows smashed, or locks picked to gain entry to spaces that would otherwise be off limits. Other times, Harry and/or Kitsuragi opt to respect the laws. For instance, when one character requests the status of the Lady Lorry Driver, Harry can choose how much information to disclose (Indie James, Part 7, 2021, 1:12). Throughout, some citizens understand their rights, and may request notice of a warrant upon having their doors knocked upon (see Indie James, Part 7, 2021, 19:19). Considering that this game is fashioned on choice, Harry can sometimes choose to operate within the confines of civil liberties, while other times opting to ignore the rules.

In contrast, civil liberties are notably absent throughout the *RDR* games (Rockstar Games, 2010 and 2019), again likely due to the period in which this game series is set. Within these games, players witness LEOs and bounty hunters engaging in activities such as burning rebel hideouts and arrests with no notice of charges. Additionally, throughout both games, those who are detained or jailed are subjected to deplorable conditions and threats by their captors.

GTA V (Rockstar Games, 2013) illustrates a specific example of a lack of civil liberties. Agents and members of the trio participate in extracting information on a terrorist attack by strapping a man to a chair to torture him (GTA Series Videos, 2022, 4:22:41; see also discussion in Polasek, 2014, p. 217 for a discussion on the “criminal threat hypothesis” against Middle Eastern individuals). *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004) also illustrates a lack of respect for civil liberties. For instance, Tenpenney and Pulaski appear wherever the protagonists are, including their residences. Despite whatever activities the player is involved in, the threat of officers intruding and inserting themselves into the story is a constant concern.

Alcohol and Substance Use

Substance abuse within law enforcement agencies may be associated with the “culture and socialization” of the job (Kappeler & Potter, 2018, 293). Behaviors such as drinking heavily and drug use have been cited, though they may not be associated directly with stressors of police work (Kappeler & Potter, 2018). *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) certainly contains multiple examples of drug and alcohol use, as this is one theme of the game. The beginning of the game sets the stage for this, as Harry wakes up surrounded by empty alcohol bottles and wearing little clothing (Indie James, Part 1, 2021, 4:50). Players are often provided opportunities to purchase alcohol and cigarettes from the local shop or to steal medications from others. In a conversation about toxicology, Kitsuragi mentions cocaine and Harry’s “Electrochemistry” responds with “Mmmmmmm... *brimming* with cocaine” (Indie James, Part 5, 2021, 31:10). Similar sentiments are repeated throughout the game with mention of various substances. Players piece together the events that occurred previously that resulted in Harry pawning his issued firearm, losing his badge, and getting his police car stuck in ice and determining whether alcohol and drugs were involved. Despite “Logic” referring to Harry as a failure, there are many opportunities for players to direct him to be a successful detective (Indie James, Part 12, 2021, 1:12)

RDR (Rockstar Games, 2010) demonstrates law enforcement drinking alcohol at various times throughout the games, though in more subtle ways than *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019). Eli, who works for the sheriff, is often seen drinking while on duty. Similarly, in *RDR2* (Rockstar Games, 2019), Sheriff Gray drinks from a jug, passes it around, stumbles out and then back in the door, to which Dutch replies, “Liquor never dulled a good man’s senses” (Game Army, 2018, 3:44:08). When Arthur and Dutch arrest moonshiners, one deputy notes they typically acquire some “for personal consumption... it’s sorta part of the job” and then proceeds to take a few jugs (Game Army, 2018, 3:50:02). While these examples do not play a primary role in either game’s storyline, they illustrate the pervasive nature of alcohol for law enforcement in these depictions.

The bulk of the discussions surrounding substance use in the *GTA* games center on involvement from LEOs in some way other than personal usage, such as in *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004) with Tenpenney allowing for drug distribution or Toreno’s undercover drug work. An exception is in *San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004). When CJ goes to meet someone in a hotel room, CJ discovers Tenpenney smoking a bong (GTA Series Videos, 2021, 2:55:30). While considered separate issues, substance and alcohol use can be also related to issues maintaining normalcy in the relations between others and officers.

Issues with Relationships

The nature of police work, such as opportunities for infidelity, shift work, and trauma from work, create additional stressors for marriages and families (Kappeler & Potter, 2018). While this issue may be less featured than some of the other themes discussed herein, it is a clear discussion point throughout *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019). Harry has issues with relationships, friendships, and even maintaining his employment. One mystery is why Harry cannot remember major events in his life. For instance, when interviewing a character who asks for his badge a potential response is “I could have eaten it for all I know. I don’t remember anything. This world, this city. Nothing.” (Indie James, Part 3, 2021, 15:01) Harry has the option to ask Evrart Claire about his family, who vehemently assures him that he is “not a family man” (Indie James, Part 4, 2021, 20:58). Even in the bookstore when reviewing the crime novel selection, he notes, “Not a single mention of all the stress this work creates upon the officers *family* ...” (Indie James, Part 11, 2021, 19:21). Harry has a lack of connection with his colleagues, as well as a lack of familial relationships, as evidenced throughout the game.

Marston (Rockstar Games, 2010) is not a traditional LEO but is more adequately described as a coerced bounty hunter. Since being separated from his family, the life they had worked on building was nonexistent

throughout the game. Once able to rescue his family and return to their home, Dutch's men seek him out for vigilante justice (Rockstar Games, 2010).

Within the *GTA* games (Rockstar Games, 2004 and 2013), there is scant mention of the families of LEOs. While not unexpected given the antagonistic nature of many of the officers, several mentions of family members by the officers, especially those of the protagonists, are made with negative or even threatening connotations. This provides further support to the idea that LEOs are often portrayed as not valuing family life.

Implications

The games under consideration here present an array of law enforcement themes, dictated by various factors including the role of the player (i.e. a character that is a LEO will have notably different experiences than that of a Wild West "outlaw" or an inner city resident). Additionally, the amount of agency players have over their characters is also a factor. The ability to create a detective with attributes such as an elevated level of intelligence will yield diverse themes from someone who a game has predetermined to be an offender.

Herein, themes of law enforcement and games were explored according to some of the themes previously found in other forms of media. Because video games are a newer form of media, this is one of many avenues that has yet to be fully explored. This study adds to the discussion of recent studies by including additional games, as well as additional avenues of media that have explored similar themes. Although this study intends to build on prior work in this area, it should be noted that no attempt was made to quantify the themes, as has been the case in earlier research (see Donovan & Klahm, 2015). Because this is intended as an exploratory study for these specific themes in video games, and in consideration of multiple potential outcomes for some of the games included, a qualitative discussion seems more appropriate.

While the *GTA* series (e.g. Rockstar Games, 2004 and 2013) has been extensively researched, little has been written specifically focused on law enforcement portrayals for the games within this series. Although the *RDR* series (Rockstar Games, 2010 and 2019) cannot be neatly packaged into a series that depicts law enforcement per se, these games amply depict the clashes between developing law enforcement agencies, bounty hunters, gangs, and citizenry as each group struggles to maintain power in developing areas. *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) is a modern example of a solidly classified "law enforcement" game, with a main character dedicated to solving crime amidst a host of personal issues and flaws.

Of note is that the games herein adhere primarily to what Nicole Rafter (2006) deems the "alternative-tradition" in her discussion on films (p. 131). She notes that these films "give us unredeemable cops, lost souls doomed to wander forever in a maze of cynicism" (p. 131). Embedded within their complicated storylines, they may incorporate themes of corruption and denying ideologies of heroism (Rafter, 2006). These games illustrate law enforcement officers as flawed, even when they are considered the protagonists in the game.

Depictions such as these are important for gaming audiences for similar reasons as they are for film and television viewing audiences. For instance, television shows categorized as "reality" emphasize violent crimes and usually result in arrest or resolution of crimes disproportionately portraying white law enforcement officers who use aggression against suspects (Oliver, 1994). Whereas prior research has demonstrated there may be a link between some types of media viewing and attitudes toward law enforcement (see Dowler & Zawilski, 2007), similar links may also exist with gaming behaviors. While this study did not explore player perceptions on the themes identified, this is a needed next step in this research. For instance, particularly in games that allow for more agency and choices, understanding the impetus behind those choices may assist in garnering an understanding of responses and reactions as part of a decision-making process.

Conclusion

This study concludes with the notion that many of the themes found in other forms of media are paralleled in video games. Although the extent to which these depictions, whether they are positive, negative, or neutral, impact audiences remains ambiguous, the current discussion indicates there is an abundance of law enforcement officers, even within games where law enforcement officers are not primary characters.

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