

Deconstruction of Themes in 'Grand Theft Auto IV'

JOHN ERIC A. TADEO

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7383-8117>

jettadeo@gmail.com

Philippine Military Academy

Baguio City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

'Grand Theft Auto IV' is a videogame that has garnered universal critical acclaim due to the innovations in gameplay and narrative at the time of its release. Alongside this success, the game has been marred with various controversies due to its depictions of sex, drugs, and violence; with the game's intention of immersing the audience in its gameplay, opposing critics have emphasized the possible morally-degrading effects and negative influence, especially to young players. However, supporting critics have asserted that GTA IV's gameplay likewise explores moral dilemmas worthy of introspection. This study takes the latter concept and enforces the same through the formal discipline of Literary Criticism. The objective of this study is to establish applicable videogame narratives as literary pieces as illustrated in the deconstruction of themes in the videogame 'Grand Theft Auto IV.' The method used is Literary Analysis/ Literary Criticism in expounding themes and exploring binary oppositions in the videogame. The overall result of the study is the extrapolation of topics on modern human conditions as portrayed in the game. This study concludes that videogame narratives – even a controversial one at that – are rich avenues for Literary Analysis.

KEYWORDS

Literature, Literary Criticism, Literary Analysis, Deconstruction, binary oppositions, narrative, videogame, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Grand Theft Auto IV (Rockstar North, 2008) has been described as a multifaceted satire on American culture (Ouellette, 2010), reviewed as a “violent, intelligent, profane, endearing, obnoxious, sly, richly textured and thoroughly compelling work of cultural satire disguised as fun” (Schiesel, 2008), with its plot portrayal having been deemed as ‘unsettling’ (Baker, 2008). As a role playing videogame, one of its great appeals is the immersion of the reader/audience/player in the plot; that is, the audience participates in the unfolding of the story as they take the role of the protagonist. As a literary text, video games go beyond the ‘spectator’ roles of readers. This quality of audience immersion elicits a more visceral reception to the narrative’s messages and themes (Ouellette, 2010).

As such, GTA IV suffers what most immersive and realistic video game titles are criticized for, dubbed as the “Columbine Theory” of realism in videogaming; in essence, “games plus gore equals psychotic behavior” (Galloway, 2004). The higher the gamer’s intake of violent gameplay, the higher the tendency of the gamer’s violent behavior in the future.

Beyond these claims and issues on the psychosocial impacts of GTA IV and other similar games, this study focuses on the literariness of the subject text, a literary analysis of ‘*Grand Theft Auto IV*.’

Literature on GTA IV in the Literary Context

As a literary piece, GTA IV was discussed as modernist literature for Realism, considering its narrative in the Aristotelian concept of ‘mimesis’ – the faithful mirroring of life given the game’s graphics, physics rendering, and social interaction of the gamer with the non-player characters (NPC) of the game’s setting (Ruch, 2012). Expounding the mimetic principle is a study asserting that the game is also an allusion to a concept called the ‘Atrocity Exhibition’ by J.G. Ballard (1969) – a reference to Freudian concepts; in this case, the cars in the game are rendered as objects of desire (Pichlmair, 2008).

Other studies elaborate on what is called a ‘transactional experience’ as to what the player-writer reflects on a moral code embedded in the game (Hourigan, 2008) and various existential crises experienced as the protagonist (Walther, 2019); explored are questions on the disparities of committing violence and crime inside the game versus doing it in actuality. That study concluded that games such as GTA IV could be “valuable tools for exploring our moral responses to the unpalatable sides of our society and our popular culture” (Hourigan, 2008). In line with emphasizing the audience/player, discussions on masculinity and social types on males have also been studied given the game’s portrayal of ‘machismo’ as reflected in other pop-cultural contexts (Beck, 2009).

This writer did a similar graduate thesis on GTA IV where it also concluded that this and similar games are avenues for ‘*catharsis*,’ the Aristotelian concept of purging negative emotions through the perusal of literature, rather than it being a stimulant to audiences to actually commit evil deeds as propounded by social learning theories (Tadeo, 2013). Also included is a discussion on theories on deviance given the criminal nature of the story’s protagonist. The lawlessness of the protagonist was similarly explored in another study that evaluated the Social Strain in the setting, questioning whether it was society or the protagonist himself that is to blame for deviance (Osborne, 2011).

Marc Quellette (2010) published a study exploring GTA IV in the contexts of Ludology –gameplay and game studies– and narrative techniques in literature through a close reading of the game vis-à-vis social commentaries about existing pop culture at the time. In essence, the study was Literary Criticism, particularly aimed at the critiquing of western popular culture as heavily referenced in the game.

In qualifying that GTA IV is literature, the researcher asserts that roleplaying videogames such as GTA IV can be classified as new forms of the literary novel (Tadeo, 2019) given that it possesses the same qualities of printed narrative texts, albeit with the distinction of incorporating technical infrastructure and gameplay aspects in storyline delivery.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The study is a literary analysis of a videogame title and follows the input-process-output framework. Input is the game itself (GTA IV) with

emphasis on its storyline and game ‘environment’; this was studied using Literary Theory along subjective and objective approaches to extract literary themes. The process involves game immersion by the researcher with more than one hundred fifty accumulated hours of gameplay. The outputs are the identification of themes as reflected in the game narrative as well as the deconstruction of the same to elicit the binary opposites as reflected by the game.



OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to establish applicable videogame narratives as literary pieces as illustrated in the deconstruction of themes in the videogame ‘*Grand Theft Auto IV*.’

METHODOLOGY

The method used is Literary Analysis/ Literary Criticism in expounding themes and exploring binary oppositions in the videogame through deconstruction.

Game Immersion. The study of Literature starts with the perusal of the literary piece; in this case, the playing of the GTA IV videogame. This involves the game immersion by the player for an estimate of one hundred fifty plus hours of gameplay for three months using a personal computer gaming setup. In seeking further immersion and understanding that may not be clarified through gameplay, game annotations and walkthroughs were likewise explored in addition to online sources such as forums and commentaries.

Extraction of in-game Media. The progress of the game’s plot is through an interplay of the player’s actions and decisions, the dialogue between the protagonist and other characters (including NPCs), and the in-game

media such as radio and television commercials and programs. The in-game media likewise serves as the extension of the story and contributes to the dynamism of gameplay. Third-party software was used to extract all the dialogues in the game with an emphasis on cutscenes and mission prompts. The same software was also used for extracting the in-game media for proper reference and critical evaluation, particularly on the eighty-nine radio advertisements amounting to a total of one hour and ten minutes of audio (as opposed to repeatedly playing portions of the game for the same effect).

Transcription of Extracted in-game Media. Manual transcription of the dialogues and radio advertisements followed its extraction for a more concrete textual form to be used as a reference.

Literary Analysis. Literary Criticism using various Literary Theories (Reader-Oriented theory, Objective Theory, Phenomenology, and Existentialism) and selected sociological principles (such as theories on deviant behavior) were used to extract the literary themes in the game's narrative. The discussion on literary themes is done in the context of the Thematic Approach. Theme, in literature, is defined as that "forceful representation of ideas or description" (Roberts, 1973), which should present and consider a subject as a multifaceted concept, also called the 'central idea' (Bressler, 1999). As literary themes aim to unify most, if not all, linking ideas in a narrative, Thematic Approach provides coherence throughout this study.

Deconstruction. This is a philosophy originally propounded by Jacques Derrida; in explaining the concepts of binary opposites as a structure, he asserts that for every center of truth or idea (privileged center), there is an opposing one (underprivileged center). Deconstruction aims to dismantle the said structure and place the emphasis of discussion towards the opposing center. In giving an example, Derrida discussed the binary opposites of the Spoken Language (privileged center) over the Written Language (underprivileged center) (Bressler, 1999). In this study, the privileged center is derived from the extracted themes in the story as reflected by the game's universe, whereas the underprivileged center is the realizations of the protagonist in the story, which presents a direct opposition to the extracted themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Game Narrative

In Grand Theft Auto IV, the player/reader/audience controls Niko Bellic, an illegal immigrant from Eastern Europe. The game starts with Niko arriving at the shipping docks of Liberty City (an epitome for the greatest city in the USA) in pursuit of the American Dream, ready to start a new and clean life. He joins his cousin Roman who operates a taxicab business, which helps Niko acclimatize to the new environment and culture. Niko is portrayed as tough, persistent, and cynical after having survived abuses from his alcoholic father and having endured the atrocities of the Balkan war. Niko himself is a war veteran and had likewise committed military-sanctioned atrocities and crimes in his home country. In his last mission as a soldier, his entire squad was killed due to the betrayal by Darko, one of their own, leaving Niko as the only survivor; it is later revealed that Niko's arrival to Liberty City was also to exact revenge for Darko's treachery. At the beginning of the game, however, Niko arrives full of hope in starting a clean slate.

In time, Niko soon discovers the darker side of pursuing success and freedom as championed by the American Dream. Instead of being given a chance for life in a society where equality, fairness, humanity, and justice are part of the social ethos, Niko gets trapped in a cycle of vicious and relentless crime, of vanity and corruption, and of life's arbitrariness that he later affirms as a normal part in a progressive setting as Liberty City. He then concludes that the American Dream as envisioned by its people is an illusion, that in its place is a nihilistic version of the same given the state of the present society.

Along with Niko's disposition in the story is the game's highlight of the political and economic contexts as part of the complexity of contemporary life with particular challenges. This includes the arbitrary issues involving immigration, the persistence of the criminal underworld, and the inevitable barbarity needed to survive in that society. Although portrayed as the 'greatest city on earth' by the game, these necessary evils were the only choices given to Niko given his present status at that time; a veteran from a war-torn country, a petty criminal, an illegal immigrant living in a gang infested neighborhood, all the while being denied access to the privileges of Liberty City citizens. In addition to having to deal with the external conflicts in the story, Niko is likewise plagued with existential challenges as he deals with modern life's realities one at a time.

Given the critically acclaimed status of the game, GTA IV portrays the American setting with detailed technical effects. These include responsive non-playable characters, realistic game physics, powerful graphics and audio rendering, and thorough attention to mood and atmosphere, which can vary from comic relief to the unrelievedly gloomy and menacing cutscenes in the story. The main plot follows missions and challenges built into the game but is likewise populated with side quests, alternate plots, and subplot endings, and numerous non-mission related activities. Progressing the game mainly involves having Niko engage in crime and deviant activities such as gun battles, explosions, slaughters and beatings, and even sexual encounters. Due to these gameplay qualities, all aspects outside of the main plot are given equal interest to the player/reader/audience; in synthesizing the themes for this study, careful consideration was given to unify these multifaceted qualities of the game.

Literary Themes in the Game and subsequent Deconstruction

1. Society, more than the individual, creates deviance

Deviance is behavior that violates widely held social norms (Zulueta, 2006), or behavior of which the social majority disapproves to the degree that something must be done about it (Archer, 1985). Conformity is when people achieve culturally prescribed goals with culturally approved means (Javier, 2002). In the game, GTA IV stresses that it is the given society, not the individual, which pushes people to deviate from the norms. This finding is anchored on three theories on deviance. First is (1) Strain Theory, which asserts that societal standards for achievement and success are the dominant causes for nonconformity (Palispis, 2007). Niko at first pursues the American Dream through legitimized means but later realizes that since crime and underhanded means are the only options given to him by society to be successful, he results in deviance instead. The second is (2) Labelling Theory, which explains that a person becomes deviant only because society brands that person to be deviant (Palispis, 2007). Niko is an illegal immigrant with ‘talents’ for crime and killing due to the Balkan wars; he was acknowledged to be anything but what he is, a criminal and a thug. Third is (3) Conflict Theory, which explains that in the hierarchy of social class or groups, the ‘strongest’ or most dominant class have the freedom and power to define what deviant behavior is; often, it will be the values of the weaker

classes which will be deemed as deviant – these are the marginalized and minority groups in society (Zulueta, 2006).

In the game, the more significant antagonists in the story belong to the upper social strata; the rich, corrupt government agents, bureaucrats, commercial magnates, and ‘acknowledged’ mob bosses. The game likewise portrays how these groups fully utilize societal machinations to promote favor to their interests and disdain against the weaker groups, i.e. radio and television advertisements, political and social movements, and promulgated laws and regulations. The binary opposites here are the conformity of individuals to the established norms by the dominating society versus the deviance thereof.

<u>Binary Opposites: Conformity vs Deviance</u>	
Dominant Truth	Alternate Truth
Conformity ----- Deviance	Deviance ----- Conformity

Alternate truth: Deviance, not Conformity, is the more Significant Social Construct.

Society promotes conformity and discourages deviance (Song, 2012). However, both conformity and deviance are considered products of society, as the same “socially prized arrangements and values in society” can also produce “socially condemned results,” labeling the latter as deviance as propounded by Merton & Nisbet, 1961 and cited by Roselfeld (1989). However, the stronger emphasis on conformity as a social product is based on its characteristic as the pressure from groups for individuals to undergo a change of actions or attitudes (Wilkes, Corrigan-Brown, & Myers, 2010).

There is a shift of emphasis from conformity to deviance when society’s complexities grow. Emile Durkheim (1897) explains that there is a desirable normative form or structure, but in times of rapid social change, a state of normlessness occurs; Durkheim terms this state of normlessness as “Anomie.” One experiences anomie when social norms weaken and malfunctions, leading to society becoming unstable; this causes certain individuals to deem living as meaningless, uncertain, or burdened with conflicts. Eventually, this results in affected individuals to stray and resort to other types of behavior, such as deviance (Panopio & Rolda, 2000).

GTA IV explores anomie through its portrayal of the contemporary environment in Liberty City and its effects and pressures towards the characters in the story. Niko, in particular, experiences this when the highly complex environment of the city along with the rapid change of culture he immersed himself into, causes him to lose his sense of belonging; it should be emphasized that Niko had a violent past and is likewise escaping vindication from a crime boss. However, upon realizing the follies in Liberty City society, Niko initially struggles to adapt to the change. Here, the feeling of contributing to a meaningful society is lost for Niko. Because of such disorientation, Niko feels that his adopted culture no longer provides adequate guides for appropriate behavior. To adapt to this strain from a rapidly changing situation, Niko resorts to deviance to reorient himself.

2. *The Naïveté of Loyalty*

Given Niko's horrible past and the dog-eat-dog –or survival of the fittest- setting of the game's universe, Niko almost entirely imposes upon himself a hard rule to never trust anyone. He explicitly establishes a strictly professional relationship between him and his clients regardless of their dangerous nature or status. Loyalty, through Niko's eyes, is a phenomenon that only worsens the effects of deception and betrayal. Throughout the game, the story implies that amidst the reality of a dog-eat-dog society, loyalty to others remains a naïve concept to begin with. This naïveté is mainly exemplified through Darko's betrayal to Niko as his friend and comrade, towards his entire squad, and towards his country by committing treason. This is also enforced through the homicidal intentions of several characters towards their closest allies and Niko's hard realistic treatment of his profession. Already embittered by his witness of and participation in the atrocities of the Balkan war, Darko's actions further cause Niko to have a cynical view of loyalty towards others. In general, this has caused his loss of faith in humanity, more so when he fully realizes the follies of American society. The binary opposites here are loyalty towards another versus loyalty to oneself.

<u>Binary Opposites: Loyalty to others vs Loyalty to oneself</u>	
Dominant Truth	Alternate Truth
Loyalty to others -----	Loyalty to oneself -----
Loyalty to oneself	Loyalty to others

Alternate truth: The Preference of Loyalty to Oneself over Loyalty Towards Another. Loyalty pertains to faithfulness. Loyalty towards oneself is discussed in Authenticity and Existentialist philosophies, where the concepts of individual freedom and choice are emphasized over the influences of others (Dreyfus, 2002). Tied with existentialism, authenticity refers to the trait of one who lives faithfully according to his nature (Burnham, 2011). In contrast, loyalty towards others pertains to one's selfless allegiance towards another.

Being loyal or true to oneself is rooted in the philosophy of Existentialism, which explains that "man has taken refuge in the collective idea which is the crowd, the masses, the group, and the public" (Cahn & Eckert, 2006). Because of this collective idea, nothing becomes personal, that man fails to become what he desires to be due to such restraint. To resolve such a limit, existentialists assert that man must be conscious of his choice and not of his reason. GTA IV presents these restrictions through the interactions of other characters towards the protagonist, specifically, how other characters (and the given society in general) constantly hound Niko into joining their cause in the story.

The Authenticity maxim 'one who lives according to his nature' is another emphasis of loyalty to oneself. Considering this, the game depicts loyalty or allegiance to others in a rather hard reality when it portrays that such allegiance is a method for deceiving one's true intentions. Simply put, betrayal happens only when loyalty is given; much like the previous theme, conformity/loyalty and deviance/betrayal are two sides of one coin. This is seen when Darko was drafted into war only to betray his squad later; other examples are how another character eventually orders his partner's death in exchange for power and how another desired his mentor's demise for reasons of building a better reputation. Niko fully realizes the follies of allegiances as he performs his duties as a hired gun.

Niko's character is that of a cold and calculated criminal; however, the circumstances surrounding his actions should be taken into account should

one consider Niko, an existentialist. One such circumstance is how he was forced to immerse himself in the mob subculture to survive. Here, the society closed its doors on Niko towards legitimate opportunities, thus, forcing him to relive his criminal profession. At this, his resolve to live by his philosophy of self-loyalty applies ethically, as the only people at the receiving end of his criminal actions are his fellow criminals and corrupted individuals. Aside from these victims, Niko results in criminal actions only when defending himself or his loved ones. Another situation where Niko lives by his own beliefs is when he is given a choice whether to eliminate a target or not in the name of justice. When he is sent by an employer to kill a thief who stole from the latter, the game gives him the choice whether to spare or kill him. Should he choose to spare him, Niko grounds his reasons that the thief was merely robbing a criminal (Niko's employer) who deserved it anyway. Similar dilemma are instances where the game forces Niko to pick whom to assassinate; here, it is one target or the other, i.e., between a corrupt police officer or a scared drug-addict. Though loyalty is indeed a human virtue, the game implies that being true to one's choice and nature is a nobler asset.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that videogame narratives – even a controversial one at that – are rich avenues for Literary Analysis. Videogame narratives are new forms of the literary novel, given that it shares the same literary qualities in delivering a story, in addition to offering interactive gameplay where the reader-player 'experiences' the story and participates in driving the plot forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendations: (1) that videogame narrative be considered in teaching Literary Criticism, and (2) that videogames, in particular be considered in the educational context given its affinity (along with other digital media) to the present generation of learners.

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