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The Digital Catharsis of Crime

Pleasure, Guilt, and Moral Boundaries in Open-World Video Games

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates how players of Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2 morally make sense of in-game crime. The study is motivated by the fact that video games are important cultural spaces where players not only watch crime and violence but also participate in them through play. While previous research on violent video games has often focused on aggression and media effects, this thesis builds on qualitative, criminological, and ethical approaches that understand players as active interpreters of virtual violence, deviance, and moral responsibility. The aim is to examine how players describe, emotionally experience, justify, question, and repair their own in-game crimes, and how the two games' systems shape these experiences. Theoretically, the thesis draws on cultural criminology, play theory, and moral agency, especially the ideas of crime as carnival, play as a bounded but unstable activity, and moral disengagement as a way of managing responsibility. Methodologically, it uses a qualitative design based on 15 semi-structured interviews and 29 Reddit discussions from four game-related subreddits, analysed through qualitative content analysis. The findings show that in-game crime is not experienced in one simple way. Players can enjoy criminal actions because they create excitement, humour, freedom, challenge, or release, but the same actions can also produce guilt, discomfort, hesitation, or attempts to undo what happened. The comparison shows that design matters. Grand Theft Auto V often makes crime feel fast, exaggerated, and easy to repeat, turning wrongdoing into action, humour, and spectacle. Red Dead Redemption 2 often makes crime feel heavier by connecting wrongdoing to social reactions, moral judgement, and visible consequences. This thesis argues that in-game crime is not morally empty simply because it is fictional. Instead, it becomes meaningful through the interaction between players, game systems, emotions, victims, and wider cultural understandings of crime, violence, and responsibility. The contribution of the thesis is to show how crime-centred games make law-breaking playable and create spaces where morality is constantly negotiated.

Keywords: in-game crime, video games, morality, Grand Theft Auto V, Red Dead Redemption 2, cultural criminology, player experience.

Popular Science Summary

This thesis explores how players make sense of crime in two popular video games, Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2. Both games allow players to steal, fight, kill, escape the law, rob people, and break rules. These actions are fictional, but they can still feel exciting, funny, uncomfortable, or morally complicated. The main question is how players morally make sense of in-game crime.

The study does not ask whether violent video games cause real-life violence. Instead, it focuses on how players talk about what they do in games. I used 15 interviews with players and 29 Reddit discussions from communities about the two games. I looked at how players described their actions, what emotions they connected to them, and how they explained moments of guilt, pleasure, humour, or discomfort.

The findings show that in-game crime is not experienced in one simple way. Many players enjoy crime in games because it creates speed, chaos, challenge, freedom, and humour. In Grand Theft Auto V, crime often feels fast and exaggerated, turning wrongdoing into spectacle and entertainment. In Red Dead Redemption 2, crime is also enjoyable, but it often feels more serious. The game world reacts more strongly to what the player does, and wrongdoing can leave more visible consequences. Players described crime in this game as more connected to the story, the main character, and the atmosphere of the outlaw world.

The thesis also shows that players often draw moral boundaries. Many players were less troubled by harming generic non-playable characters, but felt guilty about harming animals, vulnerable characters, or other real players online. Some players went back to an earlier point in the game after doing something they regretted. Others justified violence as part of the story, as self-defense, as revenge, or simply as “just a game.” This shows that players are not passive. They actively decide what feels acceptable, what feels wrong, and how to continue playing after uncomfortable moments.

The main conclusion is that in-game crime is not the same as real crime, but it is still socially and morally meaningful. Video games create spaces where players can experiment with transgression, responsibility, violence, and consequences without real-world harm. Because players participate in these actions rather than only watch them, crime in games becomes something they perform, enjoy, question, and sometimes repair. This makes crime-centred games important to study, not only as entertainment, but as cultural spaces where people negotiate morality through play.

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Introduction

Video games are no longer a niche form of entertainment, but a central part of everyday cultural life. They are not only stories or images that players watch from a distance, but interactive worlds where players act, make choices, follow and break rules, and experience consequences. In this sense, games can be understood as meaningful spaces of interaction and agency, where players negotiate deviance and compliance (Groombridge, 2008; Henry & Horgan, 2024, pp. 1-3). Their social importance is reflected in their scale, with the global player base estimated at 3.6 billion in 2025 and global games revenue projected at 188.8 billion dollars (Buijsman, 2025). Video games can therefore be understood as cultural spaces where people encounter questions of pleasure, violence, morality, identity, responsibility, and social order.

Crime-centred games are especially important because they make law-breaking playable. From a cultural criminological perspective, crime is not only a legal category but also a cultural image, shaped through media, entertainment, and popular imagination (Ferrell, 1999). Violence and crime have long been part of leisure and spectacle, but digital games add a significant difference because players do not only watch criminal or violent events, they participate in them (Delamere & Shaw, 2006, pp. 8-9). These actions are fictional, but they are not meaningless, because gameplay turns crime into something that is acted out, interpreted, and experienced within a designed world.

What makes in-game crime sociologically interesting is that it belongs to play, but it can still carry moral weight. Players know that the crimes they commit in games are fictional, yet these actions can still generate pleasure, excitement, guilt, discomfort, or moral reflection. Violent gameplay can be enjoyable, but players may also need to manage moral concerns in order to keep that violence pleasurable (Klimmt et al., 2006). At the same time, immoral actions in games can produce guilt and moral sensitivity, suggesting that virtual wrongdoing is not always experienced as empty or morally irrelevant (Grizzard et al., 2014). Consequently, this makes in-game crime an important site for studying how players negotiate the boundary between play and morality.

In this framework video game violence cannot be understood only by looking at the violent content itself. Players bring their own experiences, values, and social contexts into games, so the same game can be interpreted and played in different ways (DeVane & Squire, 2008, p. 282). For this reason, understanding video game violence requires attention to both the game and the player's practices of

play (Bareither, 2020, p. 58; Sicart 2013). Building on this perspective, this thesis understands in-game crime not as fixed game content but as a morally negotiated experience shaped through the interaction between players, their emotional and moral interpretations, and game systems.

Existing research on violent video games has often focused on whether violent gameplay causes aggression or antisocial behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson et al., 2010; Prescott et al., 2018). Although this debate is important, it can overlook how players themselves understand, experience, and morally negotiate virtual violence. Qualitative, criminological, and ethical studies have moved beyond this effects-based perspective by showing that players actively interpret violent play, that games function as spaces where deviance and control are negotiated, and that players can be understood as moral agents who evaluate their own actions within game systems (Bareither, 2020; DeVane & Squire, 2008; Groombridge, 2008; Sicart, 2009). However, less attention has been paid to how players themselves describe specific acts of in-game crime, such as killing, stealing, robbing, or escaping the law, and how they assign meaning, responsibility, guilt, pleasure, or indifference to those actions within particular game worlds. This thesis addresses this gap by comparing player accounts of crime in *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, two open-world games that both make law-breaking central to play but frame crime through different social, historical, and moral settings.

I chose to focus on these two games because both make crime central to play, while placing it within different worlds, tones, and systems. *Grand Theft Auto V*, developed by Rockstar Games, is set in the fictional state of San Andreas, especially the city of Los Santos, a satirical version of contemporary Los Angeles. The story follows three playable characters, including Michael De Santa, a retired bank robber, Franklin Clinton, a younger man trying to move beyond street-level crime, and Trevor Phillips, a violent and unpredictable criminal (Rockstar Games, n.d.a). The game allows players to move freely through the city, drive vehicles, use weapons, complete missions, interact with strangers, and trigger police responses through its wanted system. Crime is built into both the narrative and the open-world structure, often through heists, car theft, shootings, dangerous driving, and police pursuit.

Red Dead Redemption 2, also developed by Rockstar Games, is set in a fictionalised American frontier in 1899, during the decline of the outlaw era. The player mainly controls Arthur Morgan, a member of the Van der Linde gang, as the group tries to survive while being pursued by law enforcement, rival gangs, and social change (Rockstar Games, n.d.b). The game includes robberies, gunfights, hunting, travel, camp life, and interactions with strangers across towns, wilderness, and

settlements. It also includes systems such as honour, witnesses, bounties, and social reactions, which mark and respond to the player's behaviour. The game has a slower and more dramatic tone than Grand Theft Auto V, but it also contains dark humour, absurd encounters, and moments of playful freedom. Together, the two games provide useful cases for examining how crime can be made playable in different ways.

Aim, Research Questions, and Key Concepts

The aim of this thesis is to examine how players of Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2 interpret, emotionally experience, and morally make sense of in-game crime, and how game systems shape these experiences. The main research question is:

How do players of Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2 morally make sense of in-game crime?

To answer this question, this thesis is guided by three subquestions:

1. How do players emotionally experience in-game crime, including both pleasure and discomfort?
2. How do players justify, minimise, question, or repair their in-game crimes?
3. How do game systems and affordances shape the moral experience of crime differently in Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2?

In this thesis, I use the key concept in-game crime to refer to actions performed within the game world that are constructed as criminal, harmful, deviant, or morally wrongful through the game's narrative, rules, systems, characters, and social environment. The concept includes actions such as theft, killing, reckless driving, robbery, harming non-playable characters (NPCs), killing police, or interfering with other players online. These actions are virtual rather than actual, but they can still become meaningful through how players experience and interpret them.

This study does not measure whether violent video games cause aggression or real-world crime. It also does not judge whether players' in-game actions are morally right or wrong in an objective sense. Instead, it uses a qualitative research design to examine how players construct meaning around in-game crime and negotiate pleasure, responsibility, guilt, and moral boundaries through interaction with game worlds and systems. The study is limited to Grand Theft Auto V and Red

Dead Redemption 2, using material from online and offline interviews and Reddit discussions, which is analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns in how players make sense of in-game crime.

Thesis Outline

The thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter reviews previous research on violent video games, focusing on aggression debates, player meanings and emotions, criminological approaches to deviance, and ethical perspectives on games. The theory chapter then presents the theoretical perspectives used in the analysis, including Presdee's (2000) carnival of crime, play theory from Huizinga (1950), Caillois (2001), and Sicart (2014), and Bandura's (2016) theory of moral agency and moral disengagement. The third chapter outlines the methodological framework of the thesis, explaining the qualitative research design, the use of 15 semi-structured interviews and Reddit discussions, as well as the process of data collection, coding, ethical considerations, and limitations. The analysis chapter presents the empirical findings through four thematic sections: pleasure, excitement, and the attraction of transgression; boundaries, guilt, and "too far" moments; moral accounts, responsibility and repair; and game affordances and consequence systems. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main findings and reflects on what they show about in-game crime as playful, cultural, and morally negotiated practice.

Previous Research

In this chapter, I review previous research on violent video games in four main areas: psychological debates about aggression, qualitative work on player meanings and emotions, criminological approaches to deviance and control, and ethical research on games as moral systems. Much of the existing literature has focused on whether violent games produce aggression, while qualitative and criminological studies have shown that players actively interpret, enjoy, question, and negotiate virtual violence. A shared insight across this literature is that video game violence cannot be understood by looking only at game content. It is also necessary to examine how people actually play and how they bring their own experiences, values, and social contexts into the game (Bareither, 2020; DeVane & Squire, 2008). Building on this work, my thesis focuses specifically on how players of *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* describe, emotionally experience, and morally frame their own in-game crimes.

Violent Video Games and Aggression: The Psychological Debate

Psychological research on violent video games has largely focused on whether such games have measurable effects on aggression. Several meta analyses and experimental studies have reported small but statistically significant associations between violent video game play and aggression-related outcomes, including aggressive thoughts, hostile expectations, and reduced prosocial behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson et al., 2010; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Calvert et al., 2017; Prescott et al., 2018). These studies often draw on the General Aggression Model (GAM), which suggests that violent media can affect emotions, cognition, and arousal, and that repeated exposure may strengthen aggressive scripts (Anderson & Bushman, 2001).

At the same time, both the strength and even the existence of these effects have been debated. Some researchers argue that the interactive nature of violent video games may make them more influential than passive media such as television (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Others challenge this interpretation and suggest that observed links between video games and aggression are best explained by “third” variables, such as family violence or natural aggressiveness, not the games themselves (Pinker, 2002; Ferguson et al., 2008, p. 312). Ferguson et al. (2008) argue that video game violence adds little to nothing to the prediction of violent behaviour in the real world when factors like trait aggression, family environment and gender are taken into consideration. Similarly, Kühn et al. (2019) who randomly assigned adults to play *Grand Theft Auto V*, *The Sims 3*, or no game for two months found

no evidence that extended violent gameplay increased aggression or reduced empathy, prosocial behaviour, or mental health, compared to control conditions.

Beyond the psychological debate, several authors have criticised this approach for its narrow focus (Bartel, 2015; Bareither, 2020; DeVane & Squire, 2008). Bartel (2015) argues that research on violent video games has often prioritised aggression outcomes while paying less attention to the broader moral significance of virtual violence (p. 286). As a result, these approaches often focus on changes in aggressive attitudes or behaviour while saying little about how players themselves comprehend, enjoy, worry about, or morally negotiate their actions in games. This thesis therefore does not attempt to resolve the causal debate. Instead, it treats this literature as background and shifts attention to players' own accounts of in-game crime.

Player meanings, emotions and virtual violence

Alongside the psychological debate about aggression, researchers have also focused on how players themselves experience and interpret violent play. Rather than treating violence as a stimulus that produces measurable effects, this work looks at how virtual violence becomes pleasurable, routine, unsettling or morally charged within players' own practices (Bareither, 2020; Delamere & Shaw, 2006; DeVane & Squire, 2008).

One influential contribution comes from Bareither's (2020) ethnographic study with players and recorded gameplay. Drawing on observations, interviews and video material, he investigates the emotional strategies used by players to turn virtual violence into entertainment (pp. 8-10). He shows that pleasure frequently emerges from virtual embodiment, intense audiovisual feedback, and competitive or collaborative contexts where dominance, achievement and teamwork feel exciting. At the same time, players do not simply enjoy violence without reflection. They often characterise their actions as "only a game" or "just playing around", yet still describe moments of discomfort, guilt or compassion when violence appears too explicit, unjust or socially awkward. Bareither (2020) also claims that video games make virtual violence interactive, enabling players to experience intense emotions and excitement without real physical harm, and that anyone who wants to understand the impact of video game violence must consider both the design of games and the ways players actually use them (pp. 58-59).

A similar perspective is offered by Delamere and Shaw's (2006) interpretive study with self-identified "avid players" of violent games. Rather than imposing a definition of "violent video games", they allow participants to define the genre and concentrate on their own descriptions of gameplay (pp. 8-9). Players typically describe violent video games as entertaining and socially acceptable leisure, but they also voice concerns about potential negative impacts on kids and those who "cannot handle" the content. Delamere and Shaw (2006) argue that in order to handle this tension, violent games are framed as a type of "tolerable deviance", a play associated with power, hero fantasies, and hyper-real excitement that is acknowledged as deviant but is yet considered as a harmless and acceptable pastime (pp. 12-13).

DeVane and Squire (2008) extend this focus on players' own interpretations by examining how race and violence are understood in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* among young men labelled "at risk." Using focus group interviews, they show that players draw on their own experiences, identities and peer cultures when interpreting the game. Some participants perceive it only as satire and a test of gaming skill, whereas others immediately relate it to racism and everyday violence. DeVane and Squire (2008) contend that games like GTA should be viewed as "multi-meaning spaces" that do not transmit a single message but allow for many different readings, and they therefore insist that it is crucial to examine players' actual practices rather than treating all forms of play as equal (p. 279).

Together, these studies demonstrate that players actively interpret violent games, that pleasure in virtual violence is often mixed with uncertainty and moral ambiguity, and that meanings depend strongly on players' backgrounds, identities and play styles. This makes them relevant to the current study since they view players as reflective agents rather than passive users of game content. At the same time, their main concern is with virtual violence and leisure in general, or with specific themes such as race, rather than with players' precise moral accounts of crime in particular game worlds. My thesis builds on this work by focusing specifically on crime and law-breaking in *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and by examining how players talk about and feel about their crimes in the game.

Criminology, deviance and digital games

Criminological work on video games has increasingly moved away from asking only whether games "cause" crime, towards treating games as spaces where deviance, control and harm are imagined, enacted and negotiated. Groombridge (2008) argues that criminology should take games seriously

because they are rule-governed systems where players can violate rules, be punished, escape punishment, take advantage of loopholes and test limits. According to this perspective, games are structured environments where criminal activity is practiced and various forms of compliance and regulation are explored. Additionally, he introduces the concept of “ludic criminology”, which he defines as a criminology that investigates crime and deviance within play worlds and looks at the connections between virtual practices of control and rule-breaking and larger social and cultural contexts (Groombridge, 2008, p. 25).

A similar perspective supports Henry and Horgan’s (2024) call for criminology to engage more systematically with gaming. They understand video games as meaningful and emotional places of interaction and “being” in which people participate, identify, feel included or excluded, and negotiate deviance and compliance as part of their daily lives. Games are described as social environments in which participants make decisions, act as avatars, and establish emotionally meaningful attachments and conflicts, even when everyone knows the space is “not real” (Henry & Horgan, 2024, p. 3). From this viewpoint, gaming interactions and emotions are important because they contribute to broader cultures of belonging, morality, and harm.

Following this shift in perspective, cultural criminologists have begun to better understand how virtual game environments function as sites of deviance. Atkinson and Willis (2007) introduce the notion of the “ludodrome” to describe the space of play inside games and how elements of these virtual worlds bleed into everyday urban life. Focusing on players of Grand Theft Auto in particular, they argue that real urban space can become suffused with impressions, atmospheres and ways of seeing learned in the game, so that gamers move between simulated and real cities in ways that blur the boundary between them (Atkinson and Willis, 2007, p. 820). Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) expand on this idea by describing certain networked media spaces, including violent video games, as “cultural zones of exception” where socially extreme behaviour can be enacted or viewed with little apparent impact on everyday norms (p. 1293). This is similar to Presdee’s (2000) idea of carnival as a temporary space where societal norms are overturned, legitimizing transgressive behaviors that would otherwise be condemned (p. 38). In this framework, games like Grand Theft Auto can operate as “murder boxes”, bounded worlds where everyday moral rules are loosened and players are encouraged to experiment with violent or sadistic actions that would be unacceptable outside the game (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016, p. 1301).

However, subsequent empirical research on player behaviour in Grand Theft Auto V complicates this picture. Denham and Spokes (2019) conduct in-depth gameplay interviews with Grand Theft Auto V players and notice that, while some treat the game as a lawless space, many also spend a significant amount of time working, following traffic rules, customising cars, shopping, and otherwise behaving in “civilised” or pro-social ways, frequently switching between violent and non-violent play (p. 738). They argue that this reflects internalised self-restraint and ongoing moral decision-making rather than a simple release of repressed aggression, and they advocate for a more balanced perspective that takes into account both the game’s violent design and players’ agency in accepting or rejecting those possibilities. In later work, Denham and colleagues (2021) move the focus from spectacular acts of killing to the structural violence embedded into GTA’s universe, arguing that players frequently experience the game’s “realism” through inequality, precarious work, and the ongoing need to hustle. They argue that open-world games like GTA work as important “crime image spaces” where ideas about crime, harm and social order are shaped, and that criminology should look at the everyday structural harms in these worlds as well as the visible on-screen violence (pp. 88-89).

Overall, criminological research treats video games as meaningful sites where deviance, control and harm are explored rather than as neutral entertainment. It shows that games such as Grand Theft Auto can be understood both as spaces of transgression and as spaces where players display restraint, make moral decisions, and encounter structural forms of violence. However, less is known about how players narrate specific in-game crimes and how they discuss responsibility, justification, guilt, or indifference around those moments. My thesis builds on this work by comparing players’ accounts of crime in Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2, two games that both make law-breaking playable but frame crime through different systems of consequence, atmosphere, character, and social response.

Ethics, moral responsibility and games as ethical systems

Another line of research views players as ethical agents and digital games as ethical systems. According to Groen et al. (2020), ethical concerns in games arise not only from disturbing content but also from the ways in which games encourage players to act, respond and relate to others in and around the game world. In this perspective, ethics is not something added from the outside but part of how games are designed, played and discussed.

Sicart's (2009) work is particularly influential in this discussion. He proposes that computer games are ethical objects and that players are moral subjects who bring their own values into play and make decisions that matter for their sense of self (p. 63). Instead of relying just on game content, accountability is shared across designers, systems, and players. In later work, Sicart (2013) examines how games can create situations of "ethical gameplay", in which players must confront uncomfortable choices, reflect on the meaning of their actions and are unable to reduce choices to straightforward optimization. Additionally, he emphasises that morality in games is not limited to explicit good-evil choice systems. It also appears in how players interpret ordinary actions, bend or respect rules and negotiate what counts as acceptable play (Sicart, 2013, pp. 28-29).

Bartel (2015) provides a complementary viewpoint by asking whether players in video games can be considered to have free will and moral responsibility. He contends that game environments are deterministic, and players cannot do whatever they want, but they can still be held accountable for some of their actions, especially those they genuinely want to perform (p. 285). His focus is on responsibility for virtual activities, not on deciding whether those actions are morally right or wrong in themselves (p. 287). Bartel (2015) notes that even in open-world games, choices are limited, and moral-choice systems can cause discomfort when none of the available options feel acceptable, making players aware of the limits of their in-game freedom (pp. 286-287). For him, the essential question is not only whether players had the freedom to act, but also whether they had the freedom to will, that is, whether they identified with an in-game action as something they desired to do, which can make some virtual activities morally meaningful for them (pp. 289-291).

Ultimately, these ethical perspectives are important because they present players as active moral agents rather than passive receivers of game content. They also show that digital games are spaces where accountability, justification, and harm are negotiated through play. At the same time, much of this work is theoretical, design-oriented, or focused on moral choice and virtual violence more broadly. Less attention has been paid to how players make sense of crime as a specific form of playable wrongdoing, particularly in open-world games where law-breaking is built into both the narrative and the systems of play. This thesis brings a new perspective by comparing two differently built crime-centred game worlds, *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, in order to examine how players make sense of their own in-game crimes and how different game designs shape these moral experiences.

Theoretical Standpoints and Concepts

The purpose of this chapter is to set out the theoretical concepts that guide my analysis of how players morally make sense of in-game crime in Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2. My analysis does not treat game crime as a fixed message that players simply receive. Instead, I understand it as something produced through the relationship between the player, the game world, the rules and systems of play, and the wider cultural meanings attached to crime and violence. For this reason, I combine three related theoretical perspectives: Presdee's (2000) cultural criminological idea of the carnival of crime, play theory from Huizinga (1950), Caillois (2001), and Sicart (2014), and Bandura's (2016) theory of moral agency and moral disengagement. Together, they frame in-game crime as playful, cultural, and morally negotiated practice.

Crime, pleasure, and the carnival of crime

The first theoretical lens I use is Presdee's (2000) concept of the carnival of crime. Presdee's (2000) work belongs to cultural criminology, a perspective that treats crime not only as a legal or social problem, but also as a cultural and emotional phenomenon. From this perspective, crime is connected to meaning, pleasure, performance, images, and everyday life. This shifts attention away from crime as only law-breaking and towards the symbolic and emotional meanings through which crime is represented, consumed, and experienced (pp. 3-4, 15-16). Presdee (2000) argues that the context in which crime and violence are acted out is central to understanding them (p. 3). This allows in-game crime to be analysed not simply as content on a screen, but as something players experience, perform, enjoy, question, and interpret.

A central point in Presdee's (2000) argument is that crime and violence can have entertainment value. He supports that the enjoyment of crime, violence, humiliation, and hurt must be examined because wrongdoing can create emotional intensity and excitement (Presdee, 2000, p. 4). Crime is therefore not only about law-breaking, poverty, or social control, but also about emotions such as anger, frustration, excitement, hatred, and pleasure (Presdee, 2000, p. 4). He extends this argument by suggesting that modern culture turns crime into a commodity to be consumed through media, images, entertainment, and popular culture (pp. 26-28). Leisure, pleasure, excitement, and transgression therefore become closely connected in contemporary culture (p. 28). This helps frame GTA V and RDR2 as cultural products in which crime is made available for play, performance, and emotional experience.

The concept of carnival is especially important. Presdee (2000) describes carnival as a space and time in which normal order is temporarily reversed. During carnival, restraint and sobriety are displaced by excess, humour, bodily pleasure, and transgression (pp. 38-39). Behaviour that would normally be judged as improper, offensive, or criminal can become temporarily permitted inside the carnival space. Carnival therefore creates a “world upside down”, where ordinary authority and moral order are mocked, loosened, or suspended (Presdee, 2000, p. 39).

For this thesis, carnival helps explain why doing wrong in games can feel enjoyable rather than shameful. In-game crime can create a temporary space where players perform disorder, test limits, and enjoy actions that would be unacceptable outside the game. However, carnival does not mean that morality disappears completely. Presdee (2000) contends that the enjoyment of violence and cruelty is itself transgressive and can produce both pleasure and guilt (p. 30). The carnival of crime is therefore useful not only for analysing enjoyment, but also understanding why that enjoyment may become unstable.

Presdee’s (2000) idea of a “second life” is also relevant. He describes carnival as “a second life lived in the cracks of official society”, where ordinary restraint is loosened and freedom becomes central (pp. 8-9). In this thesis, I use this idea to understand how virtual crime can function as a temporary escape from ordinary rules and responsibilities. The game world becomes a space where players may experiment with transgression while remaining aware that this space is separate from everyday life.

Play Theory

The second theoretical concept I use is play theory. Since this thesis examines crime inside video games it is important to define what kind of activity play is and why actions inside play can feel different from actions in ordinary life. I draw mainly on Huizinga (1950), Caillois (2001), and Sicart (2014). These theorists do not describe play in exactly the same way, but they share the idea that play is meaningful, bounded, rule-based, and capable of producing intense experiences. Huizinga (1950) and Caillois (2001) are useful for defining the classical characteristics of play, while Sicart (2014) is especially relevant for understanding play as contextual, designed, disruptive, and morally ambiguous.

What is play?

Huizinga (1950) presents play as a fundamental part of culture rather than a trivial activity. He argues that play is not merely biological or physical because it goes beyond immediate needs and gives meaning to action (p. 1). In his words, “all play means something” (p. 1). This is important because play should not be dismissed as meaningless simply because it is fictional, imaginary, or separate from ordinary life. For Huizinga (1950), play is a cultural form that gives meaning to action and can be absorbing, intense, and socially significant (pp. 1-4).

Building on Huizinga’s (1950) understanding of play as meaningful, Caillois (2001) places greater emphasis on the formal organisation of play. He defines play as an activity that people enter freely and pursue for enjoyment (p. 6). However, he also argues that play takes place within boundaries, rules, and conventions. Play therefore combines freedom and structure. Players enter voluntarily, but once inside they participate in an organised activity governed by its own rules, boundaries, and limits (Caillois, 2001, pp. 6-10).

Sicart (2014) extends these classical approaches by moving away from understanding play primarily through its formal characteristics. For Sicart (2014), play is not always positive or simply enjoyable. It can also be challenging, uncomfortable, risky, or destructive (p. 3). He further argues that play allows people to engage with, reshape, and explore the world and themselves (p. 5). Play is therefore not only entertainment, but a way of engaging with rules, objects, spaces, others, and oneself (p. 6).

Together, these definitions show that play is fictional and separate from ordinary life, but still meaningful. This matters for studying video games because players act inside constructed worlds while still attaching emotion, interpretation, and sometimes moral discomfort to what they do.

Characteristics of play

A first important characteristic of play is that it is voluntary. Huizinga (1950) describes play as a free activity, something that marks itself off from ordinary necessity (p. 7). Caillois (2001) similarly argues that play cannot be obligatory, because if it were forced it would lose its attractive and joyful quality (p. 6). However, in video games, this freedom can become complicated. Players may enter the game voluntarily, but still feel pushed by missions, rules, or systems once they are inside it. Sicart (2014) is useful here because he argues that play is always situated in contexts that shape what players can do (pp. 6-8). Play therefore involves freedom, but not unlimited freedom.

A second characteristic is that play is separate from ordinary life. Huizinga (1950) supports that play separates participants from ordinary life by creating a temporary world with its own mood, rules, and meanings (p. 8). Caillois (2001) similarly argues that play is set apart from everyday life and organised within specific temporal and spatial boundaries (pp. 6-7). This separateness is central to the way games work. The player enters a space where actions can have different meanings that differ from the same actions outside play.

This distinction is often discussed through the idea of the “magic circle.” Huizinga (1950) uses examples such as the arena, stage, court, playground, and sacred circle to show that play takes place in marked-off spaces where ordinary life is temporarily set apart and different rules apply (pp. 10-12, 77). In this thesis, I use the magic circle as a way to understand how players frame in-game actions as belonging to a special play space, while recognising that this boundary can become unstable.

A third characteristic is that play is rule-governed. Huizinga (1950) argues that rules determine what “holds” inside the temporary world of play (p. 11). Caillois (2001) also contends that, inside play, the confused laws of ordinary life are replaced by precise rules that govern the game (p. 7). Rules are therefore not only restrictions. They create the play world and decide what counts inside it. Sicart (2014) develops this further by arguing that rules are part of a wider play context, together with objects, spaces, technologies, situations, and players (pp. 6-8). This is especially important for video games because game systems do not only allow actions. They also guide, reward, limit, and give meaning to them.

A fourth characteristic is make-believe. Huizinga (1950) argues that players know they are “only pretending”, while Caillois (2001) describes play as involving a second reality or free unreality in relation to ordinary life (p. 8; pp. 9-10). This does not mean that play has no seriousness. Huizinga (1950) stresses that the boundary between play and seriousness is fluid. Play can become serious, and seriousness can become play (p. 8). Players may therefore know that game crime is fictional while still experiencing guilt, excitement, discomfort, or responsibility.

Finally, play is fragile. Huizinga (1950) describes the play mood as “labile”, meaning it can suddenly collapse into seriousness, sobering, or disenchantment (p. 21). Sicart (2014) makes a similar point when he describes play as movement between order and chaos, creation and destruction (pp. 3,

9-10). Play can hold actions inside a temporary frame, but that frame is not always stable. This makes play theory especially useful for understanding moments when criminal play stops feeling playful.

Forms of play

For this thesis, the most relevant forms of play in Caillois's (2001) work are paidia, ludus, and mimicry. Paidia refers to spontaneous, improvised, turbulent, and loosely organised play. It is connected to free experimentation, disorder, and the immediate pleasure of acting without a fixed structure. Caillois (2001) describes it as a form of playful impulse that can involve disturbance, excess, and even the pleasure of breaking or disrupting things (pp. 27-28). Ludus, by contrast, refers to play that disciplines this spontaneity through rules, skill, effort, and challenge. It gives play structure by creating obstacles, goals, and problems that the player must overcome (pp. 13, 29). Video games can give players freedom to experiment, wander, cause disorder, or act impulsively, while also shaping that freedom through missions, goals, obstacles, and systems. Paidia and ludus therefore show how in-game crime can shift between spontaneous disorder and structured challenge.

Another relevant form of play is mimicry. Caillois (2001) uses this term to describe play based on simulation, role-play, and becoming someone else. In mimicry, the player temporarily sheds their ordinary identity and behaves through another role or character (pp. 19-22). The pleasure of mimicry lies in being or passing as another, rather than simply deceiving others (p. 21). This is important for analysing video games because players often act through protagonists, avatars, and roles. Mimicry is useful for understanding why players may interpret some actions as belonging to the character, role, or game world rather than directly to themselves.

Sicart's (2014) work connects to these ideas because he also understands play as moving between structure and freedom. He argues that play involves a constant tension between order and chaos, and between the will to create and the will to destroy (Sicart, 2014, pp. 9-10). This means that play can follow rules while also bending, testing, or disrupting them. In games, players can use rules to progress, but they can also use those same rules to create disorder.

Contextual, disruptive, and morally ambiguous play

Sicart's (2014) contribution is especially important for understanding contemporary video games. He argues that play is contextual, meaning that it happens in a wider network of people, rules, objects, spaces, technologies, and cultures (p. 6). Play is therefore not shaped by the player alone. It is also

shaped by the situation and by the designed environment. Sicart (2014) also argues that objects and situations can signal play, and that play can be designed (p. 7). This is important because video games are designed spaces that invite certain actions, make crime behaviours easier than others, and create particular kinds of experiences.

Sicart (2014) also argues that play is not always fun in a simple sense. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts, offends, challenges, or becomes destructive (p. 3). In-game crime often sits between pleasure and discomfort. Players may enjoy transgression, but the same act can also become unsettling. Sicart (2014) therefore makes it possible to understand play as pleasurable without assuming that pleasure is always harmless or morally simple.

Sicart (2014) also describes play as carnivalesque and disruptive. Play can take over a context, mock seriousness, break ordinary expectations, and reveal social conventions, assumptions, and limits (pp. 4, 11, 14-15). This connects play theory to Presdee's (2000) carnival of crime, since both approaches understand transgression as something that can be pleasurable, excessive, and revealing. However, Sicart's (2014) point is broader because he stresses that play does not simply remove norms. It can also make players aware of norms by pushing against them.

Another important idea from Sicart (2014) is that play can free players from moral conventions while still keeping those conventions present. He argues that through play people experience the world, construct and destroy it, and explore who they are and what they can do. Play therefore creates a temporary distance from ordinary moral expectation, but it does not make those expectations disappear. Instead, moral conventions remain visible because play allows players to test, challenge, or disturb them (p. 5). This is central to this thesis. It suggests that play does not simply erase morality. Instead, it creates a space where moral rules can be suspended, tested, challenged, or felt differently. This helps explain why players can enjoy virtual crime while still drawing boundaries around certain acts.

Finally, Sicart (2014) argues that play is negotiated and personal. Players negotiate the purpose and boundaries of play, including how far its meanings and consequences should extend (p. 16). He also argues that play is personal because its effects attach to players' own memories, values, and ways of being (p. 17). This matters because players do not all experience the same game action in the same way. One player may treat an act as funny, while another may experience it as uncomfortable or wrong.

Moral agency and moral disengagement

The third theoretical perspective used is Bandura's theory of moral agency and moral disengagement. While play theory explains how game worlds create special spaces for action, Bandura (2016) focuses on the moral process through which people regulate harmful conduct. This is useful for my thesis because I am not only concerned with whether players commit in-game crime, but also with how they account for, justify, or repair it afterwards.

Bandura's (2016) concept of moral agency is important because it presents individuals as active moral self-regulators rather than simply as rule-followers. People develop standards of right and wrong that guide their behaviour. When they act in ways that match those standards, they may feel satisfaction or self-worth. When they violate them, they may experience self-condemnation, guilt, or discomfort (pp. 1-2). Moral agency therefore involves self-monitoring, judgement, and emotional self-evaluation.

Bandura (2016) also argues that moral self-regulation is not automatic or fixed. People can disengage moral self-sanctions in order to do harmful things while still maintaining a morally acceptable view of oneself (p. 2). Moral disengagement therefore explains how people can behave harmfully and still feel justified, innocent, or morally intact. In this thesis, I use moral disengagement not to equate game actions with real-world violence, but to analyse the language and reasoning players use when they make sense of virtual harm.

Bandura (2016) identifies several mechanisms of moral disengagement. One mechanism is moral justification. This occurs when harmful conduct is linked to a worthy purpose, making it seem acceptable or even right (pp. 49-53). This concept is useful for analysing accounts where players describe violence as revenge, self-defence, justice, or deserved punishment. Related to this is attribution of blame, where victims or circumstances are framed as responsible for the harm, making retaliation appear deserved or self-righteous (Bandura, 2016, pp. 89-90).

Another mechanism is displacement of responsibility. Bandura (2016) argues that people may reduce self-condemnation when they see their actions as required by an authority or system rather than chosen by themselves (p. 58). This is important in video games because missions, objectives, progression systems, and character roles can all shape what players feel responsible for. A player may describe crime as "what the game wants" or as necessary for progress, which shifts responsibility away from the self and toward the game system.

Bandura (2016) also discusses the minimisation, denial, or disregard of harmful effects. It is easier to harm others when the effects of harm are hidden, distant, or forgotten (pp. 64-66). This is relevant because game worlds differ in how much harm they make visible. If consequences disappear quickly, the player may more easily treat harm as temporary or meaningless. If the game shows suffering, loss, memory, or social reaction, moral disengagement becomes more difficult.

Finally, Bandura's (2016) concepts of dehumanisation and humanisation are important for understanding moral boundaries. Dehumanisation makes harm easier because the victim is not seen as fully human, while humanisation strengthens empathy and moral restraint (pp. 84-85, 91). In this thesis, these concepts are used to analyse why players respond differently to generic NPCs (Non-Player Characters), vulnerable NPCs, animals, and real players online. When a victim appears more human, innocent, emotionally expressive, or connected to a real person, guilt and restraint become more likely.

Taken together, these concepts make it possible to analyse players' accounts of in-game crime at several levels. Presdee (2000) helps identify the pleasure of transgression, spectacle, and emotional release. Play theory explains how these actions are framed by the rules, boundaries, roles, and meanings of the game world. Bandura's (2016) theory of moral disengagement then helps examine how players manage responsibility, guilt, justification and moral discomfort. The framework therefore allows me to study in-game crime not as either harmless play or direct moral harm, but as an activity that players actively interpret and negotiate.

Methodology and Methods

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research design, since it examines how players of Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2 morally make sense of in-game crime. The purpose, therefore, is not to measure the effects of violent video games or to establish whether games cause aggression. Instead, this thesis focuses on how players describe their own actions, what emotions they attach to those actions, and how they explain, justify, question, or repair them afterwards. A qualitative approach is suitable for this purpose because it allows the study to focus on meaning, interpretation, and participants' own understandings. As Jensen (2012) argues, qualitative research is especially useful when the aim is to study social phenomena in their natural context and approach participants' understandings from their own point of view (p. 266).

Additionally, this study is comparative because it examines two open-world games that both make crime central to play, while allowing attention to differences in how players describe and experience each game. Both games were selected because they are highly popular titles developed by Rockstar Games and share an open-world design centred around crime, while differing in setting, historical context, and social environment: Grand Theft Auto V takes place in a contemporary urban setting, whereas Red Dead Redemption 2 is situated in a rural frontier world in the late nineteenth century. I do not treat Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2 as identical examples of violent gameplay. Instead, the comparison makes it possible to examine recurring patterns across the material, while also showing how different game worlds, systems, and player expectations shape the moral experience of in-game crime.

To explore this in more depth, I combine interviews with Reddit discussions as empirical material. The interviews form the main material because they allowed players to describe their experiences, emotions, and moral reflections in depth. Reddit discussions are used as supporting material to add nuance to how similar issues are discussed in naturally occurring online conversations between players. Together, these materials helped me compare personal interview accounts with broader public discussions around the games. Drawing from Bazeley (2013) triangulation does not necessarily produce one single truth, but can provide a richer and more complex picture of the phenomenon being studied (p. 406).

Data and Sampling

The empirical material consists of 15 interviews and 29 selected Reddit discussions from four public subreddits related to the two games. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face, while twelve interviews were conducted asynchronously through Reddit private messages. The participants were selected strategically because they had to be at least 18 years old and had played Grand Theft Auto V, Red Dead Redemption 2, or both (Appendix 1). These criteria were important because the study focuses on players' own experiences of in-game crime in these specific games.

The three face-to-face participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which means that an initial group of relevant participants is selected based on availability and willingness, and then asked to identify other possible participants who are also relevant to the research aims (Hansen & Machin, 2019, p. 287). This method was useful because it allowed me to reach players who were willing to discuss their experiences in depth.

The twelve Reddit interview participants were recruited through four public subreddits: *r/GTAV*, *r/GrandTheftAutoV*, *r/reddeadredemption*, and *r/RDR2*. These communities were selected because they are active spaces where players discuss gameplay, missions, characters, moral choices, humour, violence, and emotional reactions. These subreddits were created between 2010 and 2014 and had substantial weekly activity at the time of data collection, ranging from around 113,000 to 651,000 weekly visitors. They therefore offered access to active player discussions around both games. Before recruiting participants on Reddit, I contacted the moderators of the four subreddits to explain the project and ask for permission to post a recruitment request. After receiving permission, I posted a call for participants. Interested users then contacted me or responded to the post, and the Reddit interviews were conducted through private messages.

Reddit was treated as a meaningful digital field site rather than simply as an archive of comments. Digital platforms are part of everyday social life, and online spaces can be understood as socially embedded rather than separate from "real" experience (Hine, 2015, pp. 22-24, 32). Reddit is especially useful for this study because its communities are organised around specific interests, and because users often discuss personal, sensitive, humorous, or morally ambiguous experiences in a relatively open way. Online communities are also asynchronous, meaning that users can participate in discussions at different times, while the conversations remain available for later reading and analysis (Martin, 2017, p. 248).

Data Collection

The data collection was designed to capture both detailed personal accounts and broader online discussions of in-game crime. For this reason, I used semi-structured interviews as the main source of empirical material and Reddit discussions as supporting data. The interviews were semi-structured which provided both structure and flexibility. In this type of interview, the researcher uses an interview guide, but can change the order of questions, ask follow-up questions, and allow participants to answer in their own terms (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 29). This was important because players often moved between emotional, moral, narrative, and gameplay-related reflections. I believe that a fully structured interview would have limited these reflections, while a fully unstructured interview would have made comparison across participants more difficult.

The face-to-face interviews allowed for immediate follow-up questions and more detailed clarification. The asynchronous Reddit interviews were conducted through Reddit private messages. This method resembles email-style interviewing because participants can respond in writing, at their own pace, and without being in the same physical location as the researcher. Edwards and Holland (2013) note that asynchronous written interviews can allow participants more time to reflect and produce considered answers, although they may also be less spontaneous than spoken interviews (pp. 49-50). In this study, asynchronous interviews were useful because many Reddit users were geographically dispersed and already active in online discussions about the games.

The interview guide focused on players' experiences of in-game crime. Participants were asked about enjoyment, guilt, role-play, differences between the two games, NPCs and real players, and key game systems such as wanted levels, honour, bounties, and consequences (Appendix 2). The aim was not to make participants judge whether video game crime is right or wrong in general, but to understand how they personally make sense of their own actions in the games.

The Reddit discussion material was collected separately and used as supporting data, covering player discussions from 2016 to 2026. I searched broadly for posts and comments related to players' experiences of in-game crime, using terms such as crime, guilt, discomfort, humour, NPCs, animals, online harm, honour, punishment, and "too far" moments. Keyword searches are useful for identifying relevant digital media content, especially when working with large amounts of archived online material, although the quality of the search depends on the terms used (Hansen & Machin, 2019, p. 138). I selected threads and comments that were relevant to the research questions and

that contained substantial discussion rather than only memes, technical questions, or short jokes with no analytical relevance.

Analytical approach

The material was analysed through qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is an interpretive form of analysis based on coding, classification, and human understanding (Kuckartz, 2014, pp. 33-34). This was suitable because the study does not only examine what players literally say, but also how they give meaning to their actions, how they justify or minimise them, and how emotions such as pleasure, guilt, discomfort, or indifference appear in their accounts.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview material and Reddit discussions. I first used open coding, which involves carefully reading the material, comparing passages, and developing preliminary concepts and categories (Kuckartz, 2014, pp. 23-24). Some codes were conceptual, such as “moral justification”, “role play”, and “repair.” Others were closer to participants’ own words, such as “just a game” or “too far.” These in-vivo codes were useful because they kept the analysis close to how players themselves expressed their experiences.

After the initial coding, I grouped related codes into broader themes. The final analysis was organised around four main themes: pleasure, excitement, and the attraction of transgression; boundaries, guilt, and “too far” moments; moral accounts, responsibility, and repair; and game affordances and consequence systems. These themes were developed through a combination of inductive and deductive work. They were developed through close reading of the empirical material and in relation to the research questions, especially the focus on emotion, responsibility, justification, repair, and game systems.

The analysis also involved comparison between the two games. I did not analyse Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2 in two completely separate chapters because many of the same moral themes appeared across both games. Instead, I analysed them together while paying attention to differences in tone, pacing, consequence systems, and player interpretation. This made it possible to show both shared patterns and game-specific differences.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical issues were important in this study. For the interviews, participants were informed about the topic of the research and their participation was voluntary. The interview material was anonymised, and participants were given pseudonyms. Since the interviews involved discussions of violence, guilt, discomfort, and sometimes sensitive moral reflections, I avoided pushing participants to disclose more than they wanted to. The purpose of the study was not to judge participants, but to understand how they made sense of their experiences. The study also followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024), particularly regarding informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and responsible handling of research material.

For Reddit, ethical care was also necessary. Although the subreddits used in this study are public, public accessibility does not remove ethical responsibility. Online traces can be searchable and identifiable even when usernames are removed, so researchers need to reduce the risk of reidentification (Salinas, 2023, pp. 15-16). Before posting recruitment requests, I contacted the moderators of the relevant subreddits and asked for permission, even though the communities were public. In the analysis, Reddit usernames are not included. The comments are treated carefully, and identifying details are avoided where possible. This follows the broader principle that digital research ethics should involve care, confidentiality, and respect in how online users are represented (Franzke et al., 2020, p. 9).

Reflexivity was also important throughout the research process. I have played both Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2, and I was already familiar with their worlds. I had also worked on a related project in a previous course, where I focused on livestreamed gameplay on Twitch and Youtube as well as Reddit conversations. This previous engagement helped me understand the games and recognise important moments in the material, but it also meant that I entered the research with prior knowledge and expectations. Jensen (2012) understands the researcher as an interpretive subject, meaning that interpretation is part of the research process rather than something separate from it (p. 266). In this study, that meant reflecting on how my own familiarity with the games shaped what I noticed, how I understood participants' accounts, and how I interpreted moments of humour, guilt, violence, or discomfort.

To deal with this, I tried to remain reflexive while coding and writing. Following Benson and O'Reilly's (2022) idea of iterative reflexivity, I treated reflexivity as something that had to be returned to

throughout the research process rather than addressed only once (pp. 177-179). This meant paying attention to whether I was overemphasising examples that matched my own assumptions about the games. To reduce this risk, I included contradictory material in the analysis, such as players who did not feel guilt, players who rejected moral repair, and players who treated crime almost entirely as humour, routine gameplay, or part of the game's design.

Limitations

There are also limitations to the study. First, the study is based on a qualitative sample and does not aim to represent all players of Grand Theft Auto V or Red Dead Redemption 2. The interview participants were self-selected, especially on Reddit, which means that those who chose to participate may have been particularly interested in discussing moral questions, game violence, or their personal experiences. The findings should therefore be understood as an in-depth analysis of meaning-making rather than as a general account of all players.

Second, the interviews rely on memory and self-description. Participants described what they remembered doing and feeling, but these accounts may differ from what happened in the moment of play. Players may also present themselves in particular ways, for example as humorous, moral, detached, or reflective. This does not make the material invalid, because the study is interested in how players narrate and interpret their actions. However, it does mean that the analysis captures remembered and explained experience rather than direct observation of gameplay. This matters because realism and moral response in games are shaped by players' embodied experience of play, not only by what the game represents visually (Sommerseth, 2007, p. 765).

Additionally, the majority of the interviews were conducted asynchronously through Reddit private messages. This had advantages, since participants could respond at their own pace and reflect before answering. However, it also limited the immediacy of the interview situation. Unlike face-to-face interviews, asynchronous interviews made it harder to ask spontaneous follow-up questions, clarify tone, or respond immediately to unexpected details. This means that the online interviews provided valuable reflective accounts, but did not offer the same interactional depth as face-to-face conversations.

Finally, Reddit material has its own interpretive difficulties. Reddit comments often include humour, exaggeration, irony, sarcasm, and community-specific language. Meanings in online communication

are not fixed or universal, and interpretation depends on context (Hall, 1997, pp. 1-3). For this reason, coding Reddit discussions involved interpretive judgement. Some comments could be read as serious moral reflection, while others could be read as joking, performance, or provocation. I therefore treated Reddit as supporting material rather than as the main source of participant experience.

Analysis

In this chapter I present a comparative thematic analysis of how players of Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2 morally make sense of in-game crime. For ease of reading, I use the abbreviations GTAV and RDR2 throughout the chapter to refer to Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2, respectively. Drawing on online and offline interviews, and Reddit discussions, I examine how players describe criminal acts, what they feel while committing them, and how they interpret those actions afterwards. I begin by examining the attractions of criminal play, showing how crime is framed as enjoyable, exciting, and sometimes comic or spectacular. I then consider the point at which this pleasure gives way to guilt, discomfort, and moments in which players feel they have gone “too far”, particularly in relation to vulnerable victims, forced harm, and realism. In the third section, I analyse the moral and narrative accounts players use to justify, minimise, or question in-game crime, including strategies of responsibility and repair. In the final section, I examine how the games’ systems, affordances, and consequences shape the moral experience of crime. Throughout the chapter, I analyse the two games together rather than separately in order to show both recurring patterns and important differences in how crime is experienced and explained.

Pleasure, excitement, and the attraction of transgression

When I was younger playing GTA it seemed like crime was the entire point, especially with the goal being ‘see how crazy things can get while you get to 5 stars’.

- Alex, online interviewee

This quote captures how several of my respondents describe in-game crime as something attractive in itself because it produces energy, movement, and escalation. In this section I focus on crime as an emotional attraction. I show how players describe law-breaking as fun, thrilling, comic, and spectacular in Grand Theft Auto V and Red Dead Redemption 2. This approach also reflects earlier research which stresses that we need to study how players themselves produce meaning and emotion in play, rather than treating violence as a fixed message in the game itself (Bareither, 2020, pp. 58-59; DeVane & Squire, 2008, p. 279).

A strong pattern in my material is that Grand Theft Auto V makes crime feel pleasurable by turning it into comedy, spectacle, and escalation. Presdee’s (2000) idea of carnival of crime helps explain why disorder can feel enjoyable, because carnival temporarily reverses normal order and makes transgression feel exciting rather than shameful (pp.38-39). This is especially clear in how players

describe GTA V's wanted system, where crime increases police attention through a rising star rating. Alex's memory of trying to see "how crazy things can get while you get to 5 stars" shows how punishment itself can become part of the fun. For him, increasing the wanted level becomes almost a game within the game. The pleasure is not only in committing crimes, but in watching the city react, testing how much chaos the system can handle, and seeing how long he can survive the escalating response. My respondent Marco describes a similar pleasure in smaller acts of spectacle, such as running over pedestrians for "shock value" and the "damn oof" of seeing an NPC go flying. In these accounts, crime becomes a way of producing movement, absurdity, and reaction. The game therefore creates a temporary space where disorder becomes enjoyable. Actions normally linked to harm, danger, or punishment are turned into comic performance, allowing crime to feel excessive and exciting rather than shameful (Presdee, 2000, pp. 38-39).

Furthermore, the attraction of crime in Grand Theft Auto V is not limited to moments of chaos and laughter. It can also work as a quieter pleasure. In my interviews, players describe returning to the game and pushing its boundaries because it helps them switch off and create action on demand. Presdee (2000) describes this kind of transgression as a culturally familiar "second life", where people seek release and excitement away from everyday restraint (pp. 4-9). Huizinga (1950) helps explain why this can feel so absorbing in the moment. He describes play as a bounded activity that can pull the player in intensely and temporarily set ordinary life aside (pp. 8-13). My respondent Ethan captures this clearly:

Honestly the most fun thing for me is just driving around and lane splitting on the fastest bike I can find. I'm a gearhead, and I always wanted a motorcycle, but I can't trust other drivers to not hit me. So in the game I get to do all the dumb stuff I would've been tempted to do in real life, and not have the consequences.

-Ethan, online interviewee

Another interviewee, Lukas, describes the same kind of enjoyment in a more intense form:

There is definitely an adrenaline aspect to playing the game sometimes too, especially when getting into chases with other players or the law, which also feels great for distracting oneself from everyday life.

-Lukas, online interviewee

These accounts show crime as a form of leisure rather than a dramatic event. Players use small acts of law-breaking to create a private space of release inside the game. The pleasure often sits in routine sensations like movement, speed, and control, and in the feeling that everyday caution can be put on pause for a while. In this way, GTA V offers a temporary “second life” where risky actions become absorbing and pleasurable because they are held inside the boundaries of play (Presdee, 2000; Huizinga, 1950). This becomes even clearer when the game turns crime into something public, where pursuit and performance are shared with others.

Building on this, in Grand Theft Auto Online crime can become even more enjoyable when the game turns it into something public and shared. Caillois (2001) argues that some forms of play are organized around pursuit and competition, and that excitement grows from uncertainty and risk inside a rule-bound situation (p.12). In my Reddit threads, this kind of pleasure appears through online mechanics such as bounties and through practices such as griefing. A bounty is a system that marks a player with a cash reward so that others are encouraged to hunt them, and one player captures the appeal by writing, “Getting a bounty is fun, being a bounty is just so satisfying.” Griefing refers to players who deliberately harass or sabotage others for amusement rather than for the mission itself, and one thread describes the enjoyment of provoking reactions, including angry messages. These examples suggest that GTA Online crime is pleasurable not only because of what the player does, but because of what the act creates around them. It produces a situation where players are hunted, challenged, and watched by others, turning crime into a rule-bound form of risk and competition rather than a private act against the game world (Caillois, 2001).

When I turn to Red Dead Redemption 2, pleasure is still present, but respondents often talk about that pleasure in a tense and dramatic register rather than as absurd comedy. Huizinga (1950, p. 8) explains this by arguing that “the boundary between play and seriousness is always fluid”, so play can feel heavy while still remaining play. In this sense, enjoyment in RDR2 often comes from danger, survival, and the feeling of living through an outlaw scene that matters inside the game world. My interviewee Sam captures this tone when he says that the frontier shootouts are “thrilling” and “very fun”. My respondent Robin frames pleasure in a similar way by linking enjoyment to action that feels purposeful and risky, such as missions and bounty hunts that are “challenging” and “fun” because they push the player into danger and movement. Taken together, these accounts show that RDR2 does not remove pleasure from wrongdoing. Instead, it often makes enjoyment depend on a serious atmosphere where crimes feel like survival and outlaw drama. That serious mood matters for the rest

of the analysis, because it helps explain why the same game can make crime feel exciting while also making it easier for pleasure to collapse into discomfort.

At the same time, players also describe a more openly transgressive kind of fun in RDR2, especially when they talk about low-honour play. Honour is a game mechanic that tracks the player's moral standing and shapes how the world reacts to them, including dialogue and story outcomes. This matters because it turns wrongdoing into something players can experiment with and shape, rather than something they simply commit once and move past. Sicart (2014) argues that play is often disruptive in the pursuit of pleasure and laughter, and that such playful disruption can reveal what people consider acceptable and where they draw the line (pp.14-15). In other words, playful disorder is not only about losing control. It can also show how players test limits and then decide which forms of transgression still feel acceptable. Several Reddit comments embrace wrongdoing in direct terms, for example "it's so much fun killing people and robbing everyone", or "Doing dishonourable things is just too much damn fun". Others frame it as venting after a bad day, describing the relief of being "devious" with "zero consequences", even while keeping certain limits. One Reddit commenter says dishonour is enjoyable "up until a point", where robbing and rustling can be fun but cruelty such as torturing people or killing domestic animals feels like "too far", and another mentions keeping a separate save file, meaning a different game progress state, so they can play however they want without affecting their main playthrough. In these accounts, low-honour enjoyment often looks like a brief burst of free release, while the boundaries players name bring it back under a more controlled style of play. In this sense, low-honour play shows that playful disruption reveals limits rather than removing them. Players enjoy pushing against the game's moral order, but they still mark some acts as going too far (Sicart, 2014).

Ultimately, my material suggests that criminal pleasure shifts between spontaneous chaos and more controlled challenge. Caillois (2001) supports this by describing play as moving between "paidia," which is spontaneous and improvised, and "ludus," which is more organised and shaped by rules and effort (p. 13; pp. 27-29). This helps me make sense of how players talk about enjoyment across both games. In GTA V, pleasure is often framed through escalation, humour, and the fun of letting situations spiral, which fits well with a more paidia-like tone. In RDR2, pleasure is more often framed through managing danger, staying in control, and completing tense outlaw moments successfully, which aligns more closely with ludus. I do not treat this as a rigid division between the games. Instead, I treat this as a repeated difference in what players focus on, even when they are both talking about crime as fun. This matters because it shows that "crime as pleasure" is not a single

emotion. Players enjoy crime in different ways, sometimes through free chaos and laughter, and sometimes through tense success and controlled risk. That also helps explain why pleasure in these games can be unstable, because the same intensity that makes crime exciting can also make it feel uncomfortable once players sense they have crossed a line.

Boundaries, guilt, and “too far” moments

After describing crime as enjoyable, my material also shows where that enjoyment becomes unstable. Players often move from excitement to discomfort in a single moment, especially when harm feels intimate, unnecessary, or hard to distance from. Huizinga (1950) helps frame this shift by arguing that play is “only pretending”, but that the boundary between play and seriousness is fluid and that the play mood can collapse into a sobering moment (pp. 8, 21-22). In this section I focus on the moments when crime stops feeling like play. I show how guilt and “too far” talk emerge most clearly around protected victims, such as animals and vulnerable people, visible suffering, player-to-player harm, accidents that spiral, and moments where the game forces wrongdoing. This also aligns with research that frames violent gameplay as “tolerable deviance”, in which players often enjoy transgression while still marking limits and negotiating moments of discomfort (Delamere & Shaw, 2006, pp. 12-13).

A strong pattern in my material is that animals function as the clearest moral boundary in both games. Bandura (2016) argues that people normally regulate harmful conduct through internal self-sanctions and avoid actions that violate their standards because they anticipate guilt and self-condemnation (pp. 1-2). In my data, animal harm repeatedly triggers those self-sanctions quickly and intensely. One Reddit commenter captures this sudden shock and immediate urge to undo the act:

I wanted to see if I could [kill the cat], the cat got up so I thought maybe they made them immortal, then I shot it and it actually died. I placed charges on a car, detonated myself inside of it, then loaded an earlier save, losing about 10 minutes of doing stuff because I felt so bad.

-Reddit user in r/GTAV

Around this, players often describe a sharp contrast between animals and human NPCs, as if empathy turns on faster for one type of victim than another. Other Reddit users make the same distinction more directly, saying that killing people often produces “nothing”, while killing dogs, cats, or even rabbits feels sad or wrong. The same pattern appears in Red Dead Redemption 2. Even

when some players speak casually about harming human NPCs, they still treat animals as a clear moral boundary (Bandura, 2016). One Reddit commenter says this bluntly: “NPC humans I care not for...On the other hand if I accidentally step on a cat in Saint Denis I’m reloading no matter what”. Another commenter explains this difference in simple moral terms, saying: “People are different than animals. Animals have done nothing wrong”. Across both games, these accounts show animal harm as a “too far” point that produces instant guilt and repair behaviour. Players do not only feel bad. They often act to reverse the harm by reloading saves, stopping the session, or refusing to repeat it. In that sense, animals become a clear boundary where the pleasure frame breaks and self-sanctions reassert themselves (Bandura, 2016). These moments may also reflect the fragile character of play described by Huizinga (1950), where the play mood can become unstable and shift into seriousness (p. 21). Although players know the animals are fictional, some actions stop feeling playful and instead produce moral discomfort.

However, the distinction is not always absolute. Some human NPCs can trigger the same guilt and hesitation, especially when they appear vulnerable, familiar, or emotionally real rather than generic. Bandura (2016) supports that moral self-regulation becomes harder to suspend when the consequences of harm are visible and when victims are treated as fully human, because empathy and responsibility become harder to avoid (pp. 64-66, 91). In *Grand Theft Auto V*, this appears when the game signals vulnerability through small cues. One Reddit commenter describes feeling sympathy for a prostitute after noticing her fear and injury:

Last night was the first time that I felt sorry for a prostitute. She looked really sad and worried and then I noticed she had a slight black eye...I never expected to have feelings for an NPC. They made them too real!

-Reddit user in r/GrandTheftAutoV

An interviewee links the discomfort to real-world meanings of exploitation, which makes the act feel morally heavier even in a fictional setting:

Yeah, it always has to do with the prostitutes...Killing them just feels so fucked up...I know the majority of sex workers in real life aren’t doing it by choice...So even the virtual avatar of someone going through that is a sobering reminder.

-Ethan, online interviewee

Red Dead Redemption 2 produces similar reactions, often through ordinary people and routine life rather than the more satirical world of Grand Theft Auto V. My respondent Alex describes accidentally shooting the town butcher and immediately reloading, because he genuinely felt bad about the act. As he explained, “seeing that little red minus next to the cowboy hat pop up really cemented that I did a bad thing”, referring to the game’s honour indicator, which appears when actions affect the player’s moral standing. In this sense, the honour system did not simply punish the action. It reinforced and confirmed an emotional reaction that was already present. Another participant, Chris, explains that the world’s persistence and social aftermath make harm hard to dismiss, because NPCs seem to live on and because losses feel socially real:

The NPCs in RDR2 feel like real people with actual routines; they go to work, eat, and sleep. Once, a woman in Valentine saw me ride by and started screaming at me, saying I had killed her husband. I’m not sure if I accidentally ran him over earlier or if he died during the big shootout the gang had with the Pinkertons in town. Regardless, I felt terrible for her and couldn’t help but wonder how she was going to survive and put food on the table without him.

-Chris, online interviewee

Taken together, these accounts show that guilt becomes more likely when victims are presented as innocent, vulnerable, or socially meaningful. In those moments, the player cannot fully hold onto the idea that harm is just a playful act, because the game makes the effects of harm visible through fear, injury, memory, or social loss. This brings moral self-regulation back into the play experience. When NPCs are made to feel more human, empathy and responsibility become harder to suspend, and the player is more likely to judge the action as wrong rather than simply entertaining (Bandura, 2016).

This logic becomes even stronger in online play, where the harmed figure is not only represented as human but is connected to another real person. If guilt becomes harder to avoid when victims are humanised and the effects of harm are visible, then online play adds another layer because players can imagine the person behind the avatar and the time they have invested (Bandura, 2016, pp. 64-66, 91). My respondent Marco explains that harming another player feels different because “you realize that’s another human being on the other end that put work into something”. These accounts show that player-to-player harm can feel morally heavier than NPC harm because it reaches beyond the screen. The issue is not only virtual violence, but wasted effort, frustration, and damage to another person’s play experience.

However, this boundary is not absolute. For some players, the presence of a real person makes online harm more exciting rather than more uncomfortable. My interviewee Robin says that in GTA Online, players and NPCs can feel “all the same”, although attacking players may be “more fun” because they are more challenging. My respondent Peter goes further, explaining that harming another player can be funny because he imagines their reaction, especially when they write angry messages in the chat. This shows that realness can work in two directions. For some players, the real person behind the avatar produces empathy and restraint. For others, it creates a stronger emotional payoff because the act produces reaction, annoyance, revenge, or laughter. In this regard, online play makes moral boundaries more unstable, because the same social presence that creates empathy can also make transgression more rewarding.

Discomfort also takes a different shape when harm happens by accident and then escalates. Here players often feel worse not because they sought cruelty, but because they lose control and must deal with what the situation becomes. Huizinga (1950) describes play as fragile and “labile”, meaning the play mood can suddenly collapse into disenchantment or sobering disruption (p. 21). Sicart (2014) makes a similar point by arguing that play is a movement between order and chaos and that it can turn uncomfortable when it shifts into damage and loss of control rather than free experimentation (pp. 3, 9-10). A long Reddit story from Grand Theft Auto V captures this pattern of accident and escalation, where a minor interaction ends in much bigger harm:

I saw a homeless person on the other side. I wanted to use the interaction system...I gave a nice greeting to him. He responded with an insult... I decided to keep walking, not wishing to confront him. He made that impossible, chasing after me, however I dealt with this with a few punches. He was out - cold. Feeling rather bad, I called the paramedics. By the time they had arrived I was holding up the road. All blaring their horns, some going straight over me and the body. I wouldn't leave him though. They got through to us, but there was still one obstacle, this woman. She had parked her car directly on top of the homeless man's body, blocking any revival attempt. The paramedics soon grew tired...All I did was say hello to the man.

-Reddit user in r/GrandTheftAutoV

What matters here is not just guilt about the first punch. It is the experience of watching a situation spiral, feeling responsible for what follows, and realising that the game's systems can turn a small act into a larger scene of harm. Red Dead Redemption 2 shows similar spirals, especially through accidental violence followed by panic, witness killing, and attempts to repair the situation through

reloading saves or paying bounties. In this sense, discomfort often attaches to agency. Players feel most shaken when they did not mean to do harm, but the world forces them to live with what happened. This is where the fragile balance of play becomes visible. What begins as a minor or playful interaction can shift into chaos, making the player aware that play has moved from experimentation into unwanted damage (Huizinga, 1950; Sicart, 2014).

Finally, discomfort becomes most intense when players feel the game pushes them into wrongdoing and leaves little room to refuse. Bandura (2016) argues that people can reduce self-condemnation by shifting responsibility away from themselves, for example by placing responsibility on authorities or systems (pp. 58-64). In my material, however, forced harm often produces resistance rather than comfort, because guilt and unease still appear even when the action is required. This pattern comes through most clearly in my *Grand Theft Auto V* data, where players repeatedly discuss moments in which the game demands harmful actions to progress. A key example is the story-mode torture mission, where the player must carry out a torture sequence as part of the narrative. One Reddit commenter captures the discomfort by stressing the lack of choice: “It’s one thing to show a torture scene...but to actually force player to do it without an option to skip is a little much”. Other replies describe wanting to stop playing altogether, which shows that the problem is not only the violence but also being made to participate. A similar feeling appears when players describe moments where killing police seems like the only viable way forward: “Sometimes that’s really the only option you have. It seems they force you to massacre cops...it’s disturbing”. Sicart (2014) argues that play is not always “fun”, and that it can become painful or offensive when it pushes players toward experiences they do not want, revealing the limits of freedom inside a play context (pp. 3, 5). In my material, forced harm is one of the clearest points where crime stops being exciting and starts feeling morally heavy, because players judge not only the act but the situation of being made to do it.

Overall, this section shows that guilt and discomfort are not rare exceptions in crime play. They appear when the play frame breaks and self-sanctions return (Huizinga, 1950; Sicart, 2014; Bandura, 2016), especially around protected victims such as animals, vulnerable humans, real players online, unintended harm, and forced wrongdoing. These patterns also help explain why players can move between enjoyment and discomfort inside the same game. The next section builds on this by examining how players justify, minimise, or repair these moments when they talk about them.

Moral accounts, responsibility, and repair

After showing how crime can feel pleasurable and then suddenly “too far”, this section turns to how players explain those actions afterwards. A strong pattern in my material is that players rarely talk about crime as something that simply happens. They narrate it in ways that make it intelligible, justifiable, or manageable within play. This connects with previous research that treats games as rule-governed spaces where players test limits, negotiate deviance, and make sense of responsibility rather than simply consuming violent content (Groombridge, 2008, p. 25; Sicart, 2009, p. 63). In what follows, I examine how players justify and normalise in-game crime, how they shift responsibility between player, character, and system, and how they try to restore moral comfort through repair practices after moments of guilt, hesitation, or regret.

Moral accounts and responsibility: how players explain in-game crime

A first pattern is that players often justify crime by placing it inside a play frame, treating it as fiction, satire, or “just a game” so it doesn’t feel as serious as it would outside the game. Huizinga (1950) argues that play takes place inside a temporary bounded “magic circle”, where ordinary rules are suspended and actions can feel “not serious” while still absorbing the player deeply (pp. 8-13, 77). Many respondents use this separation directly. In *Grand Theft Auto V* my interviewee Marco says he does not think of his actions as crime but as “completing in-game objectives”, and adds that he does not feel much because “it’s just a game...and has no real-world consequences”. This framing also appears through satire in *Grand Theft Auto V*. My respondent Bob says he views the game “as satire” and compares it to watching anti-hero media, adding that he never feels like he is “participating in criminal activity” in the first place. In this sense, satire appears to create additional distance between the player and the action. Crime is reframed as exaggeration, humour, or social commentary rather than something that requires direct moral evaluation. However, not everyone treats in-game crime as morally empty. My respondent John, reflecting on both games, insists that the virtual setting does not cancel moral judgement:

I don’t think crime in video games defies any normal definition. Crime is crime. Despite the virtual setting I believe right and wrong still exist, both to me and the character I’m playing (whether they’re intended to believe it or not).

-John, online interviewee

Taken together, these accounts show that the “play frame” is not just an excuse or an absence of morality. It is a way players make crime feel manageable inside the game. For some players, calling crime “satire” or “just a game” makes it easier to do without feeling guilty. For others, the game is still fictional but they still bring ideas of right and wrong into it. This shows that the boundary of play is not fixed in the same way for everyone. The game may create a separate space where ordinary rules are loosened, but players still decide how far that separation goes and when moral judgement should return (Huizinga 1950).

A second pattern is that players justify crime through role-play and character logic, treating wrongdoing as something the protagonist does within the role rather than as a direct expression of the player. Caillois (2001) describes mimicry as a play that involves becoming someone else, temporarily shedding one’s own identity to inhabit an illusory character (pp. 19-22). That description fits well with how several respondents talk about Red Dead Redemption 2 in particular. Sam explains that in Red Dead Redemption 2 it feels like “Arthur’s doing”, referring to Arthur Morgan, the outlaw protagonist whose story of violence, loyalty, and possible redemption shapes the game. By contrast, he says Grand Theft Auto V feels more like “my doing”, and links this to why Red Dead Redemption 2 provokes stronger empathy. Morgan similarly frames crime as “just role play”, emphasizing that “you are playing as an outlaw”, even while drawing limits around random violence outside missions. This logic is not limited to Red Dead Redemption 2. It also appears in Grand Theft Auto V when players shift their behaviour depending on which protagonist they control:

I’ve noticed I play differently depending on who I am controlling. Franklin and Michael I oddly don’t really steal cars...I stop for pedestrians and avoid the pavement as much as possible. As Trevor though I lose my shit, people get punched, cars get stolen... I also act very violently as his character.

-Reddit user in r/GrandTheftAutoV

This matters because character logic works as an ethical filter. It does not erase moral judgement and agency, but it changes where the action is placed. In the Reddit example, the player separates the three GTA protagonists into different moral identities. Franklin and Michael are treated as characters who can be driven with more restraint, while Trevor is understood as chaotic and violent, so the player allows themselves to act more aggressively through him. This fits Caillois’s (2001) idea of mimicry because the player is not acting only as themselves. They temporarily take on the personality they believe belongs to the character and adjust their behaviour to fit that role (Caillois,

2001). In this way, role-play lets players distance themselves from some actions while still keeping moral limits in place.

A third pattern is that players justify crime by framing it as necessary to progress, earn money, or access content. Here, crime is described less as a personal impulse and more as something built into how the games work. This connects well with Bandura's (2016) idea of displacement of responsibility, where people feel less personally accountable when they treat an action as coming from an authority or system rather than from themselves (p.58). My interviewee Lukas expresses this clearly across both games:

To me crime is kinda what the game wants me to do by design. For example there is no progression if you're not committing any level of crime. Not that it's not fun to rob banks and sell drugs but there's not a way around it if it wasn't fun. To some degree I'd even say it's what gives the feeling of freedom to the game.

-Lukas, online interviewee

A similar logic appears in another interview, where my respondent Max dismisses guilt because "that is how the game works. You are simply grinding. I don't even feel bad". Framing crime as necessary for progression changes how it feels. Players can treat it as routine gameplay rather than a choice they fully own. When the game seems to demand an action, players feel less personally attached to it. When they act freely outside those demands, they are more likely to judge themselves. This helps explain why the same player can describe crime as normal in one moment and morally uncomfortable in another.

A fourth pattern is that players justify violence through retaliation and justice. Instead of treating harm as random cruelty, they frame it as deserved punishment, self-defence, or revenge. Bandura (2016) describes moral justification as a mechanism that can transform harmful behaviour into something that feels right by linking it to worthy purposes (pp. 49-53). Players repeatedly do this when they describe violence as a response to provocation. My interviewee Robin who plays both games, explains that outside missions violence "needs to have a reason", and that if someone shoots first, the logic becomes "they shot me first so I had to". In Red Dead Redemption 2 some accounts go further and frame violence as punishment. My respondent Chris describes the encounter with Emmet Granger, a former outlaw who brags about his past cruelty, as a moment where harm becomes deserved rather than excessive:

I was meeting the outlaw Emmet Granger to take his photograph and hear stories for a biography being written...I initially went along with it, figuring he was just a delusional old man. But then he started bragging about how the book should be about him because of how cruel he was, murdering men, women, children, and animals, skinning and scalping people. At that point, I dropped the shovel and went to work on him. I shot him in both legs, his gut, and his chest, and just watched him bleed out. He deserved it.

-Chris, online interviewee

In these accounts, violence feels acceptable because players frame it as deserved, turning wrongdoing into something that can be justified rather than simply enjoyed. Chris's quote is especially important because he does not describe violence as random fun or loss of control. He presents it as a response to Granger's cruelty, so the harm becomes a form of moral punishment. This fits Bandura's (2016) idea of moral justification, because the violent act is made easier to accept when it is attached to justice, revenge, or protecting others from someone seen as bad.

Across my interviews and Reddit threads, players move responsibility around. They talk differently about the same act depending on where it happened, how much choice they felt they had, and how they understood their role in the game. Sometimes they place crime inside the play frame, treating it as fiction, satire, or simply "just a game". Sometimes they soften responsibility by placing the act onto the protagonist, treating it as part of Arthur's, Trevor's, or another character's role and personality rather than something they fully own as players. In other cases, they push responsibility outward by describing crime as something required by missions, progression, money, or the game system itself. They also make violence easier to accept by framing it as self-defence, revenge, or deserved punishment. Taken together, these accounts show that responsibility is not fixed. It moves between the player, the character, the story, and the game system. This matters for the next section, because when explanation is not enough, and when an action still feels uncomfortable, players often describe doing something afterwards to make it sit better, such as reloading a save, managing honour, or other small forms of repair.

Repair strategies: how players restore moral comfort

Even when players justify criminal actions in games, some moments still feel morally uncomfortable. In those moments, moral sense-making shifts from explanation to action. Players respond in different

ways. They might rewind the event by reloading, keep transgression contained in separate saves, restore balance through systems like honour, or try to respond with care inside the game world.

A first pattern is that players respond to guilt by choosing to reload an earlier save, effectively rewinding the game to before the uncomfortable action happened. Reloading is a simple in-game option that lets players return to a previous moment and continue from there, as if the event never occurred. This fits Huizinga's (1950) claim that play can be suspended at any time (p. 8) and Caillois's (2001) emphasis that play is bounded and can return to a starting state (pp. 9-10). In both games, players describe reloading as an immediate way to undo a moment that feels wrong. In *Grand Theft Auto V*, one Reddit user describes reloading as soon as a story mission forces them to perform torture: "I felt really bad while having to torture that guy. I remember I picked the tweezers and immediately loaded a save file after it told me to pick a tooth". In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, my respondent Alex describes the same practice as part of how he protects his preferred way of playing, where the problem is not the penalty but the feeling that the act "doesn't sit right":

I get very invested in RDR2 and try to do everything as I would in real life. I don't necessarily feel responsible, but I don't like it if I inadvertently commit a crime that results in death or a large bounty. When that happens I usually load the previous save. I don't even think there's any crazy ramifications a lot of the time, it just doesn't sit right with me that I've done it.

-Alex, online interviewee

What matters here is that reloading is framed as moral self-management, not just a practical shortcut. Players use it to refuse ownership of a moment that clashes with how they want to play. By rewinding, play is suspended (Huizinga 1950), and the players protect the version of themselves, and the version of the character's story, that they are trying to maintain, instead of carrying an action forward that would make the rest of the play session feel wrong.

A second pattern is that some players do not only undo harm but also try to contain it. This appears most clearly in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, where players separate "serious" story play from short moments of chaos. Caillois (2001) describes play as a protected space set apart from ordinary life (pp. 6-7), and Sicart (2014) argues that play is negotiated, meaning that players actively decide how far its meanings and consequences should extend (p. 16). One Reddit user captures this clearly: "If I want to do funny stuff then I make a save and go on a rampage, then load the save back". In this way, the extra save acts like an internal boundary and a protected space within the larger play world

(Caillois, 2001, pp. 6-7). It lets players try out disorder without letting it spill into the version of Arthur Morgan, the game's main protagonist, or the version of the story, that they want to preserve. Rather than choosing between being moral or being chaotic, players organize both, placing them in different sections of play.

A third pattern is that players respond to discomfort by using the game's own systems and mechanics to repair or manage their actions rather than undoing the event. This is especially common in Red Dead Redemption 2, because the game has an honour system, a meter that goes up or down depending on what the player does, and that also shapes how the world responds to Arthur. Caillois (2001) helps explain why this kind of response makes sense, because he argues that play replaces ordinary life with its own precise rules, and those rules become the main way actions gain meaning inside the game world (pp. 7, 13). Sicart (2014) adds that players do not treat these rules as sacred. They treat them as tools they can use to shape the kind of play they want (p. 8). One Reddit user captures this logic: "I find it very hard to stay dishonourable. I antagonise a lot for the funny lines, I get into punch-ons, shoot-outs. Still honorable. If it ever dips I just go on a greeting spree". My point is that this is a different kind of moral work than reloading. Instead of erasing what happened, players accept that the act happened but then use the game's own moral language to restore balance. The honour system gives them a visible way to do that, so repair becomes a practice of adjustment rather than reversal.

A fourth pattern is that repair can take the form of care within the game world, especially when harm feels accidental and personal. Sicart (2014) argues that play is not always comfortable and that it moves between creation and destruction, so players often struggle to restore meaning when play slips into damage they did not intend (pp. 3, 9-10). In a Reddit thread about Red Dead Redemption 2, a player describes guilt after trying to help a stranger, only to trigger his death:

...I went out exploring and met a nice man having trouble with his horse. I decided to talk to him to see if he needed any help, he got distracted talking to me and his horse back kicked him in the head killing him and basically destroying his skull. I felt so guilty for talking to him...

-Reddit user in r/RDR2

Another user replies by describing their own attempted rescue, which escalates into disaster:

I had this encounter too. I thought that the guy could've been saved so I put him on the back of my horse and rode him to the Valentine doctor. Didn't end well at all, with the whole damn town shooting me to hell.

-Reddit user in r/RDR2

A similar reaction appears in Grand Theft Auto V, where one Reddit user describes feeling sorry after knocking out a homeless man and then calling paramedics, refusing to leave until help arrived, despite the surrounding in-game chaos of traffic, noise, and NPC reactions. In these moments, repair is not about restoring a stat or resetting time. It is about trying to answer harm with care inside the world, even when the game does not fully allow that care to succeed. This matters because the players are not simply expressing guilt after the fact. They try to act on that guilt through the tools the game gives them, such as carrying a body to a doctor or calling emergency services. However, both examples also show the limits of care inside these games. The rescue attempt either fails or creates more chaos, which means the player cannot fully undo the harm through kindness. Players try to restore order and meaning after harm, but the game world does not always support that effort. Instead, it can pull the situation back into damage, absurdity, or further violence, showing how play can move uneasily between care and destruction (Sicart, 2014). The attempt itself becomes part of how players live with what happened.

Finally, repair is not always sincere or stable. Especially in Reddit threads about Grand Theft Auto V, guilt can flip quickly into humour, mockery, or renewed violence. Presdee (2000) suggests that taking pleasure in violence is never morally neutral. Enjoying harm is itself a kind of transgression, and that is why it can produce pleasure and guilt at the same time (p. 30). This helps explain why some players respond to discomfort not by staying with it, but by turning it into a joke that makes it lighter and easier to share. One Reddit user captures this sharp turn from regret to joking revenge:

Thousands of cold blooded indiscriminate killings and this one is the only one that made me go 'ah man, sorry dude'.

Edit: I'm gonna reload the game and find this house again, see if he's back and shoot him in the face lol.

-Reddit user in r/GrandTheftAutoV

Another user rejects the whole repair logic, writing: "I've seen folks...when they accidentally kill an NPC, they reload a save. I don't even get it myself..." Together, these comments show that moral

repair is not always about restoring comfort through restraint. Sometimes it is managed through humour and escalation, which keeps the play mood going even when guilt briefly appears. Humour does not remove the discomfort but turns it into another moment of playful transgression, allowing players to continue enjoying the disruption rather than stopping it (Presdee, 2000).

Overall, these strategies show that moral engagement does not stop at justification. It continues through what players do afterwards to settle the moment, whether that means rewinding it, separating it from their main playthrough, restoring balance through the game's system, or trying to act differently within the world. These responses matter because they show morality in play as something practical and ongoing. It is not only a way players talk about crime. It is also a set of small actions they use so they can keep playing. This leads into the final section, which examines how each game's systems shape whether crime feels playful, serious, forgettable, or morally charged.

Game affordances and consequence systems

I feel like GTA truly gamifies crime, and when I was younger the fun came from being as bad as you can. I feel like in RDR2 the crime is more of a hindrance with the witness and bounty mechanics. GTA also seemed so outrageous, arsenals of weapons and rocket launchers to play around with the physics of the world.

-Olivia, offline interviewee

This quote introduces the main contrast of this section. Both games centre crime, but they design its meaning differently. In GTA V, crime often feels like play and escalation, whereas in RDR2, it is more often tied to witnesses, bounties, honour, and consequence.

So far, I have focused mainly on the players themselves, including how they describe crime, how they feel about it, how they justify it, and how they deal with uncomfortable moments afterwards. In this final section, I move from players' accounts to the games themselves. I focus on how players perceive each game as making certain actions feel easier, more rewarding, more serious, or harder to ignore. This raises a wider question about how far players' moral choices are shaped by their own values, by the social context of play, and by the systems developers build into the game. Research on games as ethical and rule-based systems suggests that morality in games is shaped not only by what players bring with them, but also by what the game allows, rewards, limits, and makes visible (Sicart,

2009, p. 63; Groen et al., 2020). My data supports this view by showing how systems, rules, rewards, punishments, and world details create different moral environments for play.

A first pattern is that GTA V is often described by my respondents as a game that makes crime feel open, fast, and consequence-light. Sicart (2014) argues that play is shaped by designed contexts, including rules, objects, spaces, and situations that signal what players can do and what kind of behaviour makes sense (pp. 6-8). Players' descriptions of GTA V show how this works in practice. My respondent Marco says that "the game allows you to do whatever you want", while Max describes it as "a game about crime" that "exists so that you can commit crimes, not avoid them". These accounts suggest that crime in GTA V is not experienced as a break from the game's normal logic, but as part of that logic. The city, vehicles, weapons, missions, and wanted system all make crime feel available and expected. As a result, players often describe crime in GTA V as casual or routine rather than morally demanding. Crime is therefore not only chosen by the player, but also encouraged by the game's design. This connects to Presdee's (2000) argument that crime can be turned into entertainment, where wrongdoing is experienced through excitement, pleasure, and temporary release rather than shame (pp. 4-7, 27-28). In GTA V, crime becomes part of the game's ordinary rhythm rather than something that interrupts the flow of play.

A second pattern is that GTA V does not remove punishment, but often turns punishment into another part of play. Along the lines of Caillois (2001) games create rule-bound spaces, where players learn the rules and turn them into skill, habit, and mastery (pp. 7, 13). This helps explain how players talk about police and wanted stars in GTA V. These systems are meant to respond to crime, but once players understand how they work, they often become challenges to manage rather than consequences that make crime feel serious. My respondent Peter explains this clearly:

So the game's consequences are not very important to me. The police are easy. You can do almost anything without consequences. Even in the military base, which is supposed to be more dangerous if you enter it or fly over it, if you own that property in the game, then they do not react unless you shoot. So the consequences keep getting reduced more and more. Also, GTA V only goes up to five stars, unlike older games that had six stars, where the army would arrive and everything would become much more intense. That does not even exist here.

-Peter, offline interviewee

Peter's account shows that consequences in GTA V are not absent, but are often experienced as temporary, predictable, and easy to outplay. This changes how the police response feels. Instead of making crime feel morally serious, it becomes another system to learn, avoid, or exploit. In this sense, the rules still matter, but mainly as obstacles that players can master. Crime therefore remains repeatable and playful because punishment functions less as a serious interruption and more as a temporary challenge within the game's rule system (Caillois 2001).

At the same time, GTA V's systems do not only allow crime. They can also push players toward reckless behaviour, even when the player tries to act more carefully. Bandura (2016) argues that moral behaviour is not shaped only by personal standards, because those standards can be overridden by situational pressures, incentives, and demands (pp. 26-27). This is useful here because some players describe GTA V missions as moments where the game makes careful or realistic behaviour impractical. A Reddit user gives a small but valuable example of this when describing missions that punish careful driving:

There are a few missions where they'll fail you for driving nicely... You'll be half-way there in traffic, stopped at a red light, and they'll say, 'This isn't the way to the dealership!' and fail the mission. So, you have to at least drive like a dick during missions.

-Reddit user in r/GrandTheftAutoV

This shows that even ordinary movement can be shaped by the game's demands. The player may want to drive realistically, but the mission defines careful driving as failure and reckless driving as progress. This matters because the game does not need to directly tell players to behave badly. It can create a situation where aggressive behaviour becomes the practical way to succeed. In this sense, reckless driving is not only a personal choice, but also a response to the pressures and incentives built into the mission structure (Bandura, 2016).

By contrast, RDR2 is often described as a game that makes crime feel heavier through systems that track and respond to wrongdoing. Drawing on Sicart (2014) play can free players from ordinary moral conventions while still keeping those conventions present, making players aware of their weight and importance (p. 5). This is useful here because RDR2 does not stop players from committing crimes, but it does make those crimes morally visible through the honour system. My interviewee Charlie explains that the game "drives" him not to commit crime because of "the morality meter and the perks you get for being more honorable", adding that this gives him a "more visceral

reaction to committing crimes”. The important point is that the honour system turns morality into feedback. Crime is not only something the player does. It becomes something the game marks, measures, and returns to the player. This makes wrongdoing harder to ignore. The honour meter does not simply reflect the player’s behaviour. It also teaches the player which actions the game recognises as moral or immoral. In this sense, RDR2 allows players to transgress, but keeps moral judgement close to their actions. Players are free to act outside ordinary morality, yet the game keeps reminding them that those actions carry moral weight within this world (Sicart, 2014).

This heavier feeling also comes from RDR2’s witness, bounty, and world-consequence systems. Following Bandura (2016), it is easier to harm others when the effects of that harm are hidden, distant, minimised, or forgotten, because there is then less reason for self-censure to be activated (pp. 64-66). RDR2 often does the opposite: it makes harm visible and difficult to forget. My interviewee Chris captures this difference between the games especially strongly:

Crime in RDR2 feels substantial. It actually feels like someone is getting harmed on the other end because the game enforces real consequences. A shop might close down, an NPC might stop spawning, or you might encounter a broken-hearted widow sobbing over her husband. You physically see the harm you’re causing in RDR2’s world, whereas in GTA V, those consequences don’t exist.

-Chris, online interviewee

What matters here is persistence. In GTA V, harm often disappears into the flow of the city. In RDR2, harm can remain visible through social reactions, missing NPCs, closed spaces, bounties, or emotional scenes. My argument is that this gives crime a longer moral life. The act does not end immediately after the player commits it. The world can continue to remind them that something happened. This makes it harder for players to distance themselves from the harm, because the game keeps its effects present rather than allowing them to fade away quickly (Bandura, 2016).

Another recurring pattern is that RDR2 does not simply make players “good.” Instead, it creates tension between moral pressure and outlaw play. Sicart (2014) describes play as a struggle between order and chaos, where players are pulled between structure, freedom, creation, and destruction (pp. 9-10). This fits the way players talk about honour. One Reddit user says, “It’s very clear the game railroads you to play high honor”, while another complains, “I dislike the honor system...it

breaks the immersion...I'm playing a gunslinging outlaw". A longer Reddit comment explains the tension well:

The game honestly seems like it wants you to play high honor, but it intentionally makes it difficult to adhere to it. It's a situation of only being as good as you can be in a game where one mistake or wrong decision can have dire or expensive consequences. The game has NPCs who intentionally start shit with you, or NPCs who misread your friendliness or mistakes as threats. It also intentionally makes it difficult to acquire significant money through honest means, which adds a layer to how far the player is willing to go in order to get money.

-Reddit user in r/reddeadredemption

This matters because RDR2's moral systems are not experienced as simple guidance. They can also feel restrictive, unfair, or difficult to maintain. The game encourages honour, but it also places the player in a world where mistakes, poverty, hostility, and survival pressures can pull them away from it, making morality feel active and unstable. Players are constantly negotiating what they can live with inside the system. In this regard, RDR2 keeps play in tension between moral order and the freedom to transgress (Sicart, 2014).

The two games also afford different rhythms of play, and this affects how crime is felt. GTA V is often described as faster and more mission-driven, while RDR2 is described as slower, more immersive, and more open to wandering. Huizinga (1950) argues that play has its own rhythm and meaning while we are inside it (p. 9). This is helpful here because GTA V and RDR2 organise the player's time differently. GTA V often pushes players quickly from mission to mission, while RDR2 leaves more room for wandering, hunting, fishing, and paying attention to the world. My respondent Jack captures this contrast clearly:

In GTA single player I mainly just focused on the missions. In RDR2 single player I took my time more to explore the beautiful world and its a more relaxed environment so I found myself just going hunting or fishing just to relax.

-Jack, online interviewee

This suggests that rhythm shapes moral attention. Because play has its own course and meaning, each game's pace affects what players notice while they are inside it (Huizinga 1950). In GTA V,

crime is often absorbed into speed, missions, and movement. In RDR2, the slower pace gives actions more space to register, so harm is harder to pass over quickly.

Taken together, this section shows that the moral experience of crime is strongly shaped by game affordances. GTA V and RDR2 both centre crime, but they do not make it feel the same. In GTA V, freedom, weapons, vehicles, missions, and manageable police systems often make crime feel light, fast, playful, and easy to repeat. RDR2 often makes crime feel heavier through honour, witnesses, bounties, slower pacing, NPC realism, and consequences that remain visible in the world. This does not mean players are controlled by the games. Rather, they make moral sense of crime inside systems that already push crime toward different meanings. These systems can also train expectations, as players sometimes carry RDR2's honour logic back into GTA V and notice when the same restraint is not recognised or rewarded. Overall, pleasure, guilt, justification, responsibility, and repair are not only individual reactions. They are shaped by the moral environment each game builds.

Conclusion and reflections

This thesis set out to examine how players of *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* morally make sense of in-game crime. Rather than treating crime in games as either harmless fantasy or dangerous content, I have approached it as a form of play that is emotionally and morally negotiated by players. The analysis shows that in-game crime is not experienced in one fixed way. It can be exciting, funny, relaxing, disturbing, justified, regretted, or repaired. This complexity matters because it challenges simple assumptions about violent games. Players do not only consume criminal content passively, nor do they always experience it as morally empty. They actively interpret what they do, draw boundaries around certain actions, and use different strategies to keep play enjoyable or morally manageable.

In general, this study suggests that crime in video games should be taken seriously as a cultural practice, without assuming that it directly translates into real-world crime. Video games are not real life, but they are also not meaningless spaces. They are designed environments where players can act, choose, experiment, and feel. This means that crime in games occupies an ambiguous position. It is fictional, but it can still create real emotions. It is playful, but it can still involve responsibility. It is separate from ordinary life, but it still draws on social meanings of violence, harm, justice, punishment, and victimhood (Huizinga, 1950). This is why the question is not simply whether players “know it is just a game”. Most of them do. The more important question is how that knowledge works, when it protects them from guilt, and when it fails to do so.

This also has implications for how violent video games are discussed more generally. Public debates often move between two simplified positions. One treats violent games as morally dangerous because they might encourage aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson et al., 2010). The other treats them as obviously harmless because everything happens in a fictional world (Delamere & Shaw, 2006). My findings suggest that both positions miss something important. Players’ experiences are more complicated than either panic or dismissal allows. The fact that players enjoy virtual crime does not mean they are morally detached, but the fact that they sometimes feel guilt does not mean game crime should be treated as equivalent to real harm. In-game crime matters because it is a space where moral meanings are tested, shifted, suspended, and sometimes reactivated.

The comparison between *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* is important here because it shows that morality in games is not only about the player's personal values. It is also shaped by design. *Grand Theft Auto V* often makes crime feel fast, comic, excessive, and easy to repeat. The city absorbs violence quickly, and punishment often becomes another form of entertainment. *Red Dead Redemption 2* more often slows crime down and attaches it to witnesses, honour, bounties, NPC routines, and consequences that remain visible. This does not mean that *Red Dead Redemption 2* is simply more moral than *Grand Theft Auto V*. Both games make crime playable and pleasurable. However, they create different moral atmospheres. One often turns crime into spectacle and momentum, while the other more often makes crime linger. This suggests that game systems do not simply organise play mechanically. They also shape what players notice, what they ignore, and what they feel responsible for (Sicart, 2009, p. 63; Groen et al., 2020).

A critical point that emerges from the analysis is that games can make wrongdoing feel ordinary by making it useful, funny, necessary, or easy to repeat. When crime becomes the route to progress, money, or mission success, players can experience it less as a moral choice and more as "how the game works". This does not remove player agency, but it complicates it. Players choose what to do, but they choose inside systems that reward some behaviours and make other behaviours difficult, boring, or irrelevant. This matters because moral experience in games is not located only in dramatic moral-choice moments. It is also built into ordinary mechanics such as driving, shooting, looting, escaping police, gaining and losing honour, or reloading a save (Sicart, 2013; Bandura, 2016).

At the same time, the analysis also shows that players are not fully determined by game systems. They often resist, reinterpret, or repair what the game makes possible. Some players refuse to harm animals, reload after accidental deaths, avoid random violence, or separate chaotic play from their main story. Others use humour to move past discomfort, or justify violence through revenge, self-defense, role play, or necessity. These responses show that players are not simply controlled by the game's moral environment. They bring their own values into play and constantly negotiate between what the game permits and what they personally find acceptable. This is where the moral significance of in-game crime becomes most visible. Players are not only asking what the game allows them to do, but also what they can live with doing inside the game.

The findings also raise a broader question about crime as entertainment. Crime-centred games make law-breaking available as leisure, spectacle, challenge, and self-expression. This is not unique to video games, since crime has long been part of popular culture through films, television, news, and

other media (Ferrell, 1999; Presdee, 2000). However, video games add participation. Players do not only watch the chase, the robbery, or the shooting. They perform it, repeat it, fail at it, improve at it, and sometimes laugh at it. This participatory quality makes video games important for criminology and sociology because they show how crime can become enjoyable without becoming morally simple. They also show how people can move between fascination and unease, pleasure and refusal, distance and empathy.

This is especially important in relation to victims. The analysis shows that players' moral reactions often depend on how victims are represented. Generic NPCs are easier to ignore, while animals, vulnerable characters, familiar NPCs, or real players online are more likely to trigger guilt or restraint. This suggests that moral concern in games is not attached only to the act itself, but also to how the harmed figure is recognised. When the victim appears innocent, human, socially meaningful, or connected to a real person, the act becomes harder to dismiss as empty play (cf. Bandura, 2016). This raises an important critical point for game design. The way games represent victims, consequences, and social worlds matters because these features shape whether harm is felt as spectacle, background noise, or moral event.

This thesis therefore builds on existing research by treating in-game crime as something players morally and culturally interpret, rather than simply as violent content. It supports research that moves beyond effects-based models and pays attention to player interpretation, emotion, and agency (Bareither, 2020; DeVane & Squire, 2008; Denham & Spokes, 2019). At the same time, it adds a specific focus on crime-centred open-world games, where law-breaking is not exceptional but ordinary. This is important because games like *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* do not only contain isolated violent scenes. They build entire worlds where crime is part of movement, progress, humour, identity, survival, and freedom. Understanding how players make sense of these worlds helps us understand how digital culture turns crime into something playable.

There are also limitations to this study. First, the analysis is limited to two specific games, *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, which are both developed by Rockstar Games. These games are useful cases because they make crime central to play, but they cannot represent all violent or crime-centred games. Other games with different genres, moral systems, levels of realism, multiplayer structures, or narrative styles may produce different moral experiences. Additionally, the study is based on a small qualitative sample of 15 interviews, supported by Reddit discussions. This allows for detailed analysis of players' meanings and reflections, but it does not aim to represent all

players or measure how common particular reactions are. Finally, the thesis approaches in-game crime mainly from a criminological and sociological perspective. This made it possible to focus on deviance, morality, responsibility, and cultural meaning, but other perspectives, such as psychology, game design, or media aesthetics, could produce different insights. The study therefore offers a focused interpretation of how some players make sense of crime in two influential open-world games, rather than a complete account of video game crime as a whole.

Future research could build on this thesis in several ways. One useful direction would be to study players while they are actually playing, through gameplay observation, recorded play sessions, or play-along interviews. This would make it possible to examine moral reactions as they happen, rather than only through memory or later explanation. It would also help show how quickly players move between enjoyment, hesitation, justification, and repair during play. Additionally, future studies could also compare a wider range of games. Crime-centred games with different levels of realism, different moral systems, or different consequence mechanics could show how design affects moral experience in other contexts. It would also be valuable to examine how gender, age, cultural background, gaming history, and preferred play style shape where players draw moral boundaries. What feels funny, harmless, disturbing, or unacceptable is unlikely to be the same for every player.

To conclude, the importance of studying in-game crime lies in the fact that it reveals how morality works when harm is fictional but experience is real. *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* show that players can enjoy wrongdoing while still making moral distinctions. They can treat crime as play while still feeling guilt. They can distance themselves from virtual harm while still trying to repair it. This does not make game crime equivalent to real crime, but it does make it sociologically meaningful. In-game crime matters because it shows how contemporary digital culture allows people to play with transgression, responsibility, violence, and consequence. It is not simply crime without morality. It is crime made playable, and because it is playable, it becomes a space where morality is constantly negotiated.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview sample overview

Name (nicknames)	Age	Country/origin	Gender	Game(s) played
Alex	25-34	USA	Male	Both games
Lukas	18-24	Germany	Male	Both games
Marco	18-24	USA	Male	GTA V
Robin	25-34	The Netherlands	Male	Both games
Sam	25-34	The UK	Male	Both games
Morgan	59	USA	Male	Both games
Chris	25-34	Portugal	Male	Both games
Charlie	32	Not-specified	Male	Both games
Jack	25-34	Canada	Male	Both games
Ethan	35-44	USA	Male	GTA V
Olivia	28	Greece	Female	Both games
John	42	USA	Male	Both games
Bob	35-44	USA	Male	Both games
Peter	34	Greece	Male	GTA V
Max	27	Greece	Male	GTA V

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview guide

Theme	Interview Questions
Gaming background and play style	1. Can you tell me a little about your gaming background? For example, how often do you play games, at what age did you start playing, and so on? 2. Which of the following games have you played, and approximately how much time have you spent on each one? GTA V story mode, GTA V online mode, RDR2 story mode, RDR2 online mode. 3. How do you usually play these games? For example, do you prefer completing the story, free roaming, exploring, playing online, or something else? 4. What do you like most about this game? What draws you to play it? What made you continue playing it? 5. If you are also familiar with the other game, what is your impression of it, and why have you not played it?
Perceptions of crime and moral boundaries	6. When you hear the term “crime within the game” in GTA V or RDR2, what kinds of actions come to mind? <i>Prompt if needed:</i> I mean things like robbery, murder, stealing a car or horse, attacking innocent NPCs, or being chased by the police. Do any of these fit what you think of? 7. Are there actions that you see as “normal gameplay” and others that you

	see as more “wrong” or as “crossing a line”? What separates them for you? For example, killing enemies versus innocent passers-by, or killing humans versus animals. 8. Are there specific crimes or actions that you avoid in the game, or that you find impossible to do? If yes, what makes you avoid them?
Experiences, emotions, and justifications	9. Can you describe one or two moments in the game when you did something “criminal” that you remember? For example, what happened step by step, what led you to do it at that moment, how you felt while it was happening, and how you felt immediately afterwards? 10. When you see these actions, do you view them as “wrong” in some way, or not? Why? 11. What might you tell yourself in that moment? For example, that it is just a game, that the mission requires it, and so on. 12. Have you ever felt guilt, discomfort, or that something was excessive? If you remember, please give me an example. 13. Have you ever tried to play morally, without committing crimes? Why?
Agency, responsibility, and game design	14. When a crime happens in the game, who do you think is responsible? You as the player, the character, the

	game, the story, or the mission? 15. Do you think there are moments when the game itself pushes you toward crime? For example, through mission objectives, rewards, or failing the mission if you do not do it. 16. Are there moments when you feel, or felt, that you had a real choice to do something else, but still committed a crime? 17. In GTA V, what affects you most when you commit crimes? For example, the police, the wanted stars, or the fact that there are not many consequences? 18. Do you behave differently when something is part of a mission compared to when you are in free roam? Why? What is different?
Social and online context	19. When you play online, do you feel that it changes how you see things or how you feel when you harm another player? For example, does it feel more “personal”, more serious, or the same as harming an NPC? 20. Do you watch streams or clips? Do you think this affects what seems “normal” or “funny” in the game? 21. How would you describe crime in this game in one sentence? 22. Is there anything I did not ask you that you think is important for understanding how players experience crime within the game?