

## Grand Theft Auto III: Satisfying a Thirst for Control, Violence, and Fantasy

By Lindsey Peugh

*Grand Theft Auto III is a Play Station video game that directs a man, whom we'll refer to as "Joe", on a series of errands for mob bosses in fictional "Liberty City." Through his jobs, ranging from destroying coffee stands to relocating cars to various areas of the city, Joe earns money, the favor of some mob bosses, and the hatred of the cops and certain street gangs. Joe often faces situations in which he must perform violent actions to acquire the means to accomplish his missions. Innocent bystanders can be killed for their money in gory, blood-filled fashion while Joe rips and tears into their bodies with a baseball bat. Cops and enemy gang members can be run over with cars as Joe escapes danger and the consequences of his actions. And to top it all off, Joe can pick up a prostitute, drive into a secluded area to employ her services, and then kill her to take back his money. Most video games are used exclusively as a form of entertainment; however, this violent game does more than just entertain its players.*

A strong aspect of Grand Theft Auto III (GTA3) that appeals to people who buy the game is the fact that the player completely controls Joe's actions. This longing for control suggests that game players lack the feeling of domination in their everyday lives. For the people who spend a majority of their day at school or work, the game provides an outlet that allows them to be "the boss." In a letter to the Editor of the New York Times, one GTA3 player wrote, "[games] are healthy realms of fantasy for [people], who often feel powerless in society's decision-making processes

and disenfranchised from its circles of the 'hip' and 'relevant'" ("Video"). Grand Theft Auto III allows players a sense of control when they might feel "powerless" in everyday society. Clifford Geertz, in his essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight", writes of a Balinese man, "as he watches fight after fight...he grows familiar with what it has to say to him" (425). The Balinese watch the cocks rip and tear into each other; this violence provides them with a sense of excitement and fulfillment. This is also true for a man or woman playing Grand Theft Auto III. Through each action players direct Joe through, they are able to transfer themselves into Joe's character. "It 'can really douse the irritation that a day of grueling office work affords,' says Chris Green, 23, an avid game player ..." (Weiss). As Joe walks down the streets of Liberty City, he is at the mercy of his puppeteer. If the game player feels like killing one of the innocent bystanders in the fictional city, then the player makes Joe do it. This aspect of the offers the American game player an outlet from their often "powerless" position in everyday society. Further examined, Grand Theft Auto III tells a multifaceted story of control, violence, and fantasy to its players and suggests that what is found in this game substitutes in fantasy form for what is missing from players' real lives.

Just as Clifford Geertz sees the Balinese cockfights as a form of violent expression for Balinese men, Grand Theft Auto III can be seen as an equivalent form of expression for American game players. Geertz writes, "... Balinese go to cockfights to find out what a man, usually composed, aloof...feels like when, attacked, tormented, challenged, insulted, and driven in results to the extremes of fury ..." (424). When the cocks, which are viewed as extensions of their male caretakers, are attacked, their owners and supporters also feel attacked (Geertz 425). As mentioned above, the player transfers, in fantasy form, a desire for the release

violence allows when manipulating Joe. The players extend their feelings through Joe's character. When Joe is hit by a car or shot by an enemy, the puppeteer suffers through Joe and is overcome with frustration and anger as game points diminish and Joe's life force fades away. The game comes to life as the PlayStation control pad vibrates and buzzes, suggestive of Joe's pain and fury. This pain and aggravation, in effect, crosses the boundary between TV screen and reality and often produces a violent reaction from the control holder. In view of this, game players use Grand Theft Auto III to feel what it is like to be pushed by an aggressor just as the Balinese use cockfights.

The violent expression produced by a transfer of character is one aspect that draws game players to Grand Theft Auto III. Geertz argues that "every people ... loves its own form of violence" (424). The Balinese go to cockfights and American game players go to Grand Theft Auto III. GTA3 players must summon basic survival instincts in the form of violence in order to keep Joe alive on the streets of Liberty City. These violent actions would often be considered irrational if performed in real life, but since the players are able to transfer themselves into Joe's character, they are able to execute these actions in a rational manner. This allows players to satisfy the need for violent expression, which Geertz attests everyone has.

The evidence shows that game players can exercise their violent expression in Grand Theft Auto III to satisfy their need for violence, as they are often unable or unwilling to do so in the everyday world. One New York Times reader believes that games like GTA3 allow people to take their anger and violent tendencies out in a "harmless outlet" instead of "[exercising] their personal demons and self-developed inadequacies in the real world" ("Video"). Thus, people who might be unable to satisfy their need

for violence in the workplace or at school are able to manipulate Joe in Grand Theft Auto III to satisfy their inclinations. This ability prompts game players into using GTA3 to satisfy their needs and desires through character control.

Grand Theft Auto III allows players to become someone they are not without consequence. A fantasy of many people is to become the stereotypical rebellious, risk taker that has no concern for the law and no care in the world. This person, who is often seen in movies and on television, can also be seen in Joe's character in Grand Theft Auto III. For the person who has always wanted to become this character, Grand Theft Auto III allows the dream to take shape. Boston Globe writer, Joanna Weiss, writes that games have given us "a way to shrink the distance between the part of us that wants to break rules and the good sense that keeps us in line. And it has given us a jolting reminder that, from a safe distance, you can get a surprising amount of pleasure from being bad" (par. 4). This realization permits game players to control Joe through a series of horrific acts while always knowing they won't have to face the "real" police. It's just a fantasy, just a game, but for those who play GTA3, it provides a sense of fulfilling a fantasy that they are often unable to acquire away from the game. This demonstrates the desire of game players to often want to satisfy urges that they are unable to carry out in their daily lives. They are able to implement their desired actions into the character they control and this allows for the carrying out of illogical actions through reasonable measures.

Is it inherent in 21<sup>st</sup> century man to long for the means to realize aggression and domination? This question has been and will be debated, for there is no readily available answer. Despite the debate, one can see that Grand Theft Auto III uncovers a story filled with game playing characters that are given the opportunity

to accomplish much of what might be missing from modern life: control, violence, and the means to fulfill blood thirsty fantasy. GTA3 provides players the opportunity to feel like “the boss,” if only for a short while. Players are able to use the game as an extension of themselves to fulfill the fantasies they are unable to indulge in daily life. Though fairly horrific and of questionable taste, Grand Theft Auto III offers a way to become rebellious and violent without causing real harm.

#### Works Cited

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