

# SCCJR Development Fund

## Digital Deviance/Digital Compliance: Criminology, Social Interaction and the Videogame

Final report

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### Introduction and orientations

This project sought to begin a process of scoping out and developing criminological perspectives on videogames and the social worlds of videogames and gamers through two interactive workshops. Its starting orientation was social interactionism and the understanding of videogames as meaningful and affective places and spaces of interaction, presence, and 'being'. This orientation sees videogames as potential spaces of cultural expression, symbolic representation, meaning-making, and identification; as interactive spaces of (real and imagined) participation and collaboration; and as 'social worlds' which participants inhabit and in which they exercise (some) agency in negotiating their deviance and compliance. These digital social worlds are part of the fabric of everyday experience for many people who already drift continuously between presence across different facets of the digital technoscape (including internet, social media and gaming) and the analogue world, potentially finding meaning, connection and identification across them all. This project was thus, from the outset, situated in the study of videogames and videogaming within traditions of social interactionism and the sociology of deviance, but it also sought to contribute directly to more recent developments in the field exploring the importance and effects (and affects) of representational forms, symbols, and cultural narratives, such as within visual, cultural and narrative criminologies. In relation to videogames themselves, the project aimed to be open-minded and not restrictive about what could be included. For example, although 'crime' features within many videogames as a dimension of the narrative, action, or game world, many games do not feature 'crime' but feature, or can be played in ways, that signify deviance or compliance. Therefore, the project did not restrict itself to the study of 'crime games', or any particular category of games, but remained open to the diverse forms that videogames take (in terms of subject matter, genre, platform etc.).

### *The workshops*

Two interactive workshops were held involving criminologists from throughout the SCCJR network:

1. **Workshop 1:** Edinburgh University. 28 April 2023. This workshop was used to examine the three starting themes that had been set up in advance by the co-investigators as a potential means of giving direction and focus to the discussion. Where it was recognised

that there was some overlap across them it was agreed that they worked adequately in terms of organising the discussions into meaningful working groups and that they did identify three distinct dimensions through which the criminological study of videogames could be pursued. Findings from each of the working group discussions will be set out later in the report. The working themes were:

- Digital deviance in testing architectures of worlds: playing games the ‘wrong’ way. Mods, cheats, grinding, and beating the game’s systems and designs.
- Digital deviance in online social worlds: community and etiquette with online others. Social interactions with the digital avatars of others. ‘Friends’ and wider community participants and discussion-group participation. Rules of design and rules of practice. From mentoring to camping, trash-talk, and rage-quitting.
- Digital deviance in offline open worlds: agency, identification and the seductions of crime and compliance. Solo experience of open worlds, the seductions of crime and ‘honour’, identification and inclusions and exclusions.

2. **Workshop 2**: Edinburgh Napier University. 7 June 2023. This workshop was used to revisit and reflect on discussions from the previous workshop. WORD notes for each of the working groups had been made available at the April session and they remained accessible online for participants to make notes or add points of reflection before this meeting. These WORD notes provided the basis for the Working Group Reflections report that follows.

### *The report*

There are two main sections to this report of the project.

1. **Criminology, social interaction, and the videogame.** This section outlines both the starting theoretical orientations of the project and emergent ideas from the working groups. It aims to show that any future study of videogames from a criminological perspective already has a wide set of theoretical tools to draw from.
2. **Working group reflections.** Issues discussed in the working groups are summarised and linked back to the previous section on theory.

The report concludes with a brief discussion of some possible future directions for research that were suggested by the project.

## **Criminology, social interaction, and the videogame: theoretical insights from the workshops**

Video games – as media objects, as cultural practices, and as structures of feeling – can tell us quite a bit about the collective desires, fears, and rhythms of everyday life in our precarious, networked, and procedurally generated world. (Anable, 2018: 132)

This section sets out some of the theoretical perspectives that came up throughout the design of the project and within working group discussion. They are discussed here to provide a sense of the kinds of issue that participants thought might merit future research from a criminological perspective. The overall conclusion of the group was that videogames should be on the research agenda of criminology. Two dimensions of video games stood out as particularly significant to the group; the kinds of interaction afforded around and by videogames, and videogames as culture and representation. Several other theoretical possibilities also emerged through discussion.

### **Interaction, presence, and para-sociality:**

One thing that distinguishes videogames from other forms of visual cultural representation is that they are interactive. Players are involved in videogame worlds and make decisions and choices within them. They may also perform as characters or as avatars of themselves. There is a growing literature on interactions and attachments enabled through different kinds of digital technologies and AI (Anable 2018; Turkle 2012; Ling 2008). Interaction ritual (Collins 2004; Goffman 1956; 1967; Henry 2021) is especially promising, examining the dynamics of encounters and how they are important in generating emotion through affirmation of self-identities. It raises issues of etiquette (e.g. Rubin and Camm 2013), role and performance (e.g. Nardi 2010), and how we know ourselves, and our status, through our encounters (e.g. Sekrst 2023).

There was a distinction made between the online and offline worlds, the former being less controversial in that in online worlds players' interactions would be with other human actors, albeit mediated through the game world and its design (Schroeder 2002). However, even in offline game-worlds (here much of the discussion was on open world games, but the same could apply to more tightly scripted narrative adventures) players 'interact' with characters in ways that may still generate forms of 'connection'. Literatures on para-sociality and presence show how people can form 'imagined' relationships with TV personalities or others not known to us directly (Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013; Cerulo 2011). This is not to suggest that people don't know that they are watching TV or playing a game, rather just that such mediated encounters can still be important to people – they 'feel real' to the extent that the emotions are real. This means, for example, that people can feel harmed by cheating in online worlds or seen and 'represented' (or not) in offline interactive games. That interaction takes place in all kinds of videogame and that interaction does involve emotional and cultural engagement was a

recurrent theme in discussion. Furthermore, the dynamics of those interactions and their connection with representations of identities and moral politics serve as a foundation on which people can feel a sense of belonging or alienation, inclusion or exclusion. Interaction ritual theorising presents a valuable conceptual toolbox we can use to unpack the significance of the videogame in this context.

### **Visual criminology/cultural criminology:**

Videogames are a cultural phenomenon scarcely explored in criminology, with some notable exceptions (Skott and Skott Bengston 2022; Denham et al. 2021; Denham and Spokes 2019; Mazurek and Gray 2017; Atkinson and Rogers 2016). Visual criminology has raised the profile of the exploration of symbols and meaning in all kinds of visual representation, including art, film, photography, street art etc. (Carrabine 2016; Rafter and Brown 2011; Young 2014). Of particular interest to the study of videogames is the issue of dominant ‘normalised’ representations (“this is just how things are”) and possibilities for more counter-visual challenges – where visual media are used to challenge the status quo meanings of the world more commonly represented in the mainstream (Armstrong 2017; Story 2017).

Atkinson (2023; 2021) has engaged with contemporary depictions of the Star Wars universe as sites of meaning-making about issues of policing, securitisation, and politics. These depictions are deeply intertwined with several game-based narratives (e.g. [Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order](#); [Star Wars Jedi: Survivor](#)) which situate the player and their game-world experiences at the centre of complex legal, social, moral, and political phenomena (i.e. terrorism, genocide, activism, and uprising). In video games, players are invited to engage in a multi-sensory meaning making process of what might otherwise be distant, intangible, or opaque. In both their current format and future developments of gaming technologies (e.g. VR/AR/MR), games by nature are inherently interactive cultural resources which make non-negotiable demands of their players to become active participants in crime and punishment, architectures of power, and security politics. Whether videogames can or do allow for possibilities for counter-visual challenge or whether they reflect an essentially conservative industry was an issue reflected upon but not resolved. On the one hand there are military connections with some of the mainstream first person shooters, but even big games are also culturally sophisticated, dealing in political and cultural satire, environmental concerns, corporate corruption etc., and a large body of smaller scale ‘steam’ games (still accessible through major platforms including Sony and Microsoft) provide possibilities for more critical content (Anable 2018). The kinds of criminological analysis provided to film and TV and the representations and problem-constructions involved also seem very applicable to contemporary videogaming (Rafter and Brown 2011; Yar 2010; Clover 2015).

### **Subcultures and identities:**

Different groups and cultures work in and play videogames and classic subcultural theory may facilitate deeper analysis of this. Work by Anable (2018) identifies gendered aspects of gaming,

both in terms of game design and the industry, but also in terms of players. Mazurek and Gray (2017) have explored issues of race and representation in gaming. Gaming is also an area where communities of hackers (Coleman 2010) and ‘modders’ (who engage with the ‘code’ of games to alter, refine or even contribute new content voluntarily to the a game’s community, typically of enthusiasts on PC) work, with varying degrees of accommodation by industry, previously being viewed as a welcome ecosystem extending interest in and building community around a game (Gambotto-Burke 2008). More recently modding has been reigned in again by companies seeking to prevent what they consider to be a dilution of their brand and a “threat to public morals” (Lyles 2023). Classic techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza 1957) also have some traction for exploring some of the aberrant behaviour within game-worlds, from cheating in competitive multiplayer games, to the targeting and abuse of other gamers, primarily based on gender, race, or sexuality (see Salter 2018 on ‘Gamergate’).

### **Architectures and design:**

Games are designed to make players feel a certain freedom of choice through their participation but, even in the most open world, this is a constrained ‘autonomy’ framed by the technological architectures and interfaces of the game and the platform. Autonomy, control, and compliance are played out within these architectural constraints (Lessig 2006), but, as in the example of mods, may themselves include attempts to alter or manipulate the architecture. This can lead to a back and forth between gamers and game designers where it becomes apparent that gamers have found or are exploiting holes in the architecture for their own benefit (either for the thrill of breaking game design, but potentially also to cheat in competitive games), which game designers aim to ‘patch’ as soon as possible. Theoretical perspectives popular in science and technology studies like ‘Social Worlds Theory’ (Clarke and Star, 2023), and New Materialism(s) (see Coole and Frost, 2010) may enable us engage in deeper analysis of the interaction between people and technologies, but also recognise agentive properties of material non-human forms alongside language, discourse and interaction more generally.

### **Governance and ‘policing’:**

There are multiple aspects of governance and policing of potential applicability to gaming worlds and the industry itself (workshop discussions were more focused on the former). In online and competitive gaming worlds architectures and rules that are designed in play a key role (Juul, 2005; Whitson and Doyle 2008). There are also ‘formal’ policing entities in the form of the online support/tech teams who attempt to ensure compliance deal with complaints of inappropriate behaviour from other players. These teams are sometimes known as “peacekeepers” (Williams 2006) who have a range of sanctions at their disposal including exclusion from the game to community shaming (and reporting to the police where, for example, something actionable such as hate crime was involved). The latter points to more informal mechanisms where player have, often over long periods of time, developed their own social rules and etiquette that overlay any formal, designed architectures. As noted, breaches of

these rules can cause very real distress to those who have invested a lot of themselves in the game (Schroeder 2002). It was noted that the multiple, overlapping forms of formal and informal policing of game worlds suggests that they might meaningfully be approached as a hybrid online space, and might draw from work on hybrid security and mass private property (Wood and Dupont 2006; Wakefield 2003). Wider theories on law and regulation (including corporate regulation and self-regulation) will also be relevant (Morgan and Yeung 2007).

### **Learning:**

The idea that games are valuable learning tools is not new, and there have been uses of them within formal education programmes (see: Krotoski 2005). The US military have also used first person shooter games as part of training programmes to develop combat strategies. Many games have processes of learning embedded within them (levelling-up) and learning apps (such as the Duolingo languages learning app) clearly use elements of gaming—levelling up, scoring points, high scorers lists ('gamification') – to help to maintain interest and focus in the task, something known as the 'gamification' of learning. Learning also cuts across the other themes above, as communities of gamers, hackers, modders, designers etc. are all locked into continual processes of learning.

**Emotion:** Emotion came up a lot in discussions, as part of the experience of games (excitement, frustration, wonder, calm, fear, anger) to the experiences of community and/or exclusion in the worlds. Some (by no means all) games feature transgression and crime as core elements of their narrative and gameplay and such kinds of game do seem to illustrate the seductions of crime (Katz 1988) that in gaming worlds can generally be carried out in safe spaces without causing harm. To some extent the excitement of engaging in such games could be a form of 'edgework' where people play out exciting and dangerous roles. Conversely, games increasingly reward 'good' behaviour or at least give players an option to play as an honourable or dishonorable character, often with notable effects on the game-world (including how other characters treat you) and the narrative conclusion. As game narratives have developed so have feelings of empathy for characters and for your own character's predicament. Games increasingly serve a wide range of emotional states.

### **Working Group Reflections**

In the following sections we briefly outline summations of the workshop-based discussions that took place under each of our proposed thematic areas. We divided evenly across each of the thematic areas that reflected the interests of each discussant, while also equally distributing early-career and mid-career academics. The following narrative is built on a series of coproduced notes gathered online via 'google docs' facilitating synchronous and asynchronous collaboration during and after the events. The online documents functioned as a space for the development of conceptual ideas, project brainstorming, and as a transparent record and prompt from which discussion could be re-engaged. The first workshop functioned as a space to

explore our collective interests and identify possible research questions and projects that fell within each of the thematic areas of interest. The second workshop then provided a space to continue to develop theoretical and empirical project ideas and explore future collaborative possibilities across SCCJR institutions. Combined, this approach to both scoping and capacity building gave space to discussants to reflect on and develop the intellectual interests in video games as an object of criminological inquiry amongst diverse voices, while establishing common ground and generating creative disruptions in the face of current trends. Perhaps the most central current that united every discussant was a fundamental dissatisfaction with the persistent, yet unevidenced, suggestion playing out in media and popular discourse that playing video games have generative criminogenic qualities. Providing a more nuanced and appreciative corrective to reductive arguments about video games and crime quickly became one of our groups' primary motivations.

Overall, the workshops clearly established there is a varied and rich collection of possibilities and capacity for collaboration across the SCCJR on research related to videogames and criminology. The categorisation we adopted was arbitrary for the most, founded on intuitive reflection and personal experience. As we worked through each thematic area it became evident through our observations that they were overlapping and entangled. We acknowledge that here as this will become more apparent in the discussion below.

There are a growing number of criminologists and those in adjacent disciplines internationally with an interest in connecting criminological concepts and theories with the videogame, some of whom are eager to be involved in any future work. Last, but crucially, it is important to recognise that the ideas and observations below are a synthesis of all workshop attendees' contributions, note taking, and discussion and not solely those of this report's authors.

### *Digital deviance in testing architectures of worlds*

There was a clear sense among colleagues that the architecture of games and their design reflected interesting visions of social control, which generated and/or reproduced behaviours, values, moralities, and economic orders. Many role-playing-games empower players to enact moral positions (malevolent/benevolent) by design, but designers' selection of choices inevitably constrains the moral decision making available to players. In the last decade, gamers have witnessed the proliferation of microtransactions in popular online and offline games. These afford gamers the opportunity to exchange legal currency for in game content like in game currency, 'skins', weaponry, armour, vehicles, and housing (see for example Fortnite, Grand Theft Auto Online, or Call of Duty Warzone) while allow gamers to customise their experience and gameplay to a greater degree. In many cases, game designers argue these economic models afford players a greater degree of individual expression, while they have equally been criticised for enabling the exchange of monetary value for competitive advantage. Crucially game designers through the very nature of the code they generate serves to monetise

the interactional qualities (function, aesthetic, or hierarchy) of games themselves and thus exploiting the sociability of the players they attract (King et al. 2020).

New materialism(s) arguably provides an opportunity to move beyond human-centric analyses of video games and 'deviance' and examine how the material forms of game architectures and both human and non-human processes are entangled with and actively co-produce the social worlds of players. Imaginaries and values held by developers shape the form a videogame takes, and how it evolves throughout its lifecycle is a product of gamers play-based human and non-human sociality. Interaction-ritual chains are techno-materialised and consolidate positively held values into the code-based foundations of games, while transgressions are procedurally hard-coded out. These processes play out visibly in comments threads, player surveys, alpha and beta testing, and patch-notes for update releases. These also play out invisibly through the data gathered by developers on how players interact with games on their platforms of choice. Ultimately, NPCs and game AIs materialise and co-produce those very social worlds with players as they progress through, make choices in, and react to game-worlds. Video games present an ideal site in which to push theorising of moral politics and normative development beyond human-centrism and explore how they are entangled with and embedded in gaming hardware and software architectures, and in turn enacted by both the organic and non-human.

### *Digital deviance in online worlds*

Our second thematic area considered the nature of deviance in online games where players cohabit, cooperate, and compete synchronously and asynchronously in shared instances of a diverse range of virtual worlds. One area of interest theoretically and empirically was the nature of rules in online games. The group reflected on interplay between encoded rules and the organic emergence of etiquette in shared virtual worlds. The nature and complexity of rules vary dramatically across game categories and the context in which they are played; causal or professional, online, or offline. Some rules are formally established and automatically enforced by the game design (e.g. attempting to kill one's teammates in many first person shooters is limited either by disabling damage, or reflecting shots back at the transgressor). Other more informal rules or etiquette emerge over the course of a games lifetime that tend to relate ways of playing deemed legitimate or illegitimate, honourable or dishonourable.

Keeping with the example of the Call of Duty series, as online play evolves and players become attuned with the nuances and capacities of weaponry, the 'maps' in which play takes place, and the entry or 'spawn' points in which players appear in the 'maps'; 'strategies' of play emerge that take advantage of game design which become a point debate about the fairness of their use. 'Spawn-camping', a highly effective strategy at accumulating 'kills' in a game by learning the points of entry for the opposing team and staying in a position that allows enemy players to be attacked before they have a chance to enter the game. The play strategy when executed effectively allows a sufficiently knowledgeable player or team to pin down the opposition and

deny them the ability to move around the map or play the game. More commonly used by lone players, the strategy is for the most part frowned upon, and game designers deploy various methods of design to constrain it; map design, randomised spawn points, spawn points responsive to player position, or momentary invulnerability after spawning. Other examples include the overuse of weapons with large amounts of damage (e.g. grenade launchers), which lead designers to 'nerf' or reduce the damage dealt by a hit from those weapons. Similarly, where certain game modes allow 'friendly fire' to simulate real combat, where players kill their team-mates repeatedly (trolling) they themselves might be killed for that round or 'kicked' from the game or party.

In other games less centred on intensive combat, cheating or indeed 'innovation' in the social structure of the game world similarly emerge. 'The Division' an open world online third person shooter designed to promote strategic cooperative and competitive play in a post apocalyptic US city, sparked a debate among players and designers in 2023. The studio updated the game's terms of service making the 'farming' of experience points a 'ban-able' action. 'Farming' refers to practices where players identify a bug or design flaw in a game that allows the rapid generation resources, experience, or that enable the player to progress or accumulate some form of capital more quickly than the designers intended. The practice has become increasingly contested in an environment where micro-transactions are present, where 'farm' might be interpreted as a pseudo-theft. The studio took further action against players who had engaged in the practice in the 'The Division 2', by erasing the progress they had acquired through this approach to game progression they deemed illegitimate. The consequent debate which broke out on games forums on Reddit and Steam centred around questions of responsibility. Where the flaw in the game is a fault of the designer who has failed to address an issue, questions are raised were about whether a practice is 'acceptable play' and whether players can legitimately engage creatively with games in this way if the game 'allows it'.

Online games often require players to interact in voice or text chat as well as 'in-game'. Women's and minority groups experience of harassment in games and the gaming industry more generally has been increasingly recognised in the past decade. Industry scandals like Gamergate and a growing body of research has revealed significant misogyny and sexism in gaming, prompting a growing response from players (Fox and Tang 2017). Equally, persistent presence of racism (Ortiz 2019), and forms of extremism ([The New York Times](#) 2023) in online gaming contexts has evoked calls for the continued development of a multi-faceted response across gaming industry and communities.

Platform and game developers engage in policing online games using both the technological tools available to them, but also by providing modes by which gamers can police themselves. Developers routinely address transgression by issuing software updates to patch 'flaws' in code, alter the dynamics of gameplay, or amend their terms of service (somewhat mimicking state governmental power). Players participate in both formal and informal modes of policing

behaviours in online game. Across all platforms, players are routinely encouraged to 'report' profiles who breach terms of service (i.e. cheat, engage in any form of harassment, racism, sexism, etc.) to their platform's moderators, and are equipped to do with a designed in report function. Platforms, much like police recorded crime, regularly report on nature and quantity of policing in which they are engaged to effectively maintain order and player safety in virtual spaces (see for example Microsoft Corporation 2023). In the first 6 months of 2023, Xbox live received 27.31 million reports of breaches of their 'community standards' from its player community (Microsoft 2023: 7). 50% referred to communications between players, 39% to players' conduct, and 11% to user-generated content. Microsoft reportedly took 19.56 million enforcement actions against players, 87% of those being proactive (not reported by a player) and only 13% (2.47 million) from player reports. Enforcements actions include content 'take-downs', temporary suspension of the player account, permanent bans from the network, device bans from the network, game specific suspensions and 'strikes' against a player account. These patterns raise interesting, arguably criminological questions about the nature, scope, and governmentalities evident in platform led policing in the Xbox live community (and online gaming platforms more generally).

Beyond those formal modes policing delivered by game platforms and designers, players themselves actively engage in informal modes of social control. In-game chats and lobbies are also frequent sites of degradation rituals (Garfinkel 1956), in which players are 'called-out' and shamed for engaging deviant or criminal behaviours both informal (e.g. spawn camping) or formal (e.g. harassing other players). In larger multi-player games teams are given the option to vote to 'kick' a player from a lobby or server. These tools of collective efficacy allow players to control their virtual spaces of play in a way that cultivates and reinforces share values, norms, and play styles. Game worlds also routinely become spaces for communication and social interaction with 'real world' networks. For several discussants, video games functioned as vehicle for maintaining real world social connections with family or friends either at a distance or indeed as way of spending time together co-presently. Video games are also a site in which events that take place in the physical world can continue to play out. In 2021, after several accusations of sexual harassment were alleged to take place in Blizzard Studios, players organised several in-game protests in their most popular title World of Warcraft condemning the studio and calling for a response ([PC Gamer, 2021](#)).

While online games undoubtedly generate their own moral schemas, they also become sites of enactment and contestation of offline norms, values, deviance, stigmatisation, and punishment. The patterns of platform enforcement (see Microsoft Corporation 2023: 21) reveal both the vast and complex nature of governance and policing in which gaming platforms, designers and players are necessarily engaged in order reinforce etiquette and rules about how games ought and ought not to be played, and importantly how players ought to interact. We argue that the videogame presents criminologists with ripe and interesting field sites in which to examine how contemporary social issues and forms of social control and policing play out.

### *Digital deviance in offline open worlds*

When exploring deviance in offline open worlds, the group's discussions centred around interrogating several examples from own personal experience. First, in many games, deviance is in fact expected and reflects compliance. Second, 'parasociality' is an inherent part of single player 'campaigns' in which players form relationships with non-human actors (albeit often anthropocentric actors). Third, we reflected on the role, function and meaning of gaming in players everyday lives. Last, we considered whether the consumption of /engagement with video games equates to engagement with art and culture which, like painting, literature, or film, offers commentary, critique, and contribution to mainstream values and power structures. We expand on each of these below.

In open world single-player games, a 'campaign' composed of a complex series of mandatory and optional 'tasks' normally lead players through a narrative structure which imposes order and structure on an otherwise far-reaching sometimes non-sensical virtual space. In recent years video games in general, but several specifically, have received negative public and media attention where violence, crime, terrorism, and war lie at the centre of their narratives and gameplay. This combined increasing visual realism enabled by technological leaps in graphics processing, has been argued to be associated with adverse behaviours in young people ([Dailymail 2018](#)). Several games produced by the game studio Rockstar have been at the centre of these controversies (i.e. The [Grand Theft Auto](#) series [GTA], [Red Dead Redemption](#) 1 and 2 [RDR1/RDR2], [Bully](#)). In these games, being 'deviant' is what you do to be compliant with what the games requires you to do. In Red Dead Redemption, the narrative is ultimately about the end of the old west', allowing players to experience the hollowness and failure of the 'outlaw' lifestyle. While progressing this narrative, gun fights, robbery, murder and kidnapping all invite players to experience the lifestyle and 'excitement' of crime and, but there is equally a grey area in games like RDR where players need to engage in difficult moral decisions about how to play and 'have fun' in the world that has implications for their wider experience of it more generally. From tasks like hunting and fishing, simple interactions like greeting non-playable characters [NPCs], or going on a 'rampage', how players conduct themselves becomes a game mechanic through 'honour systems' (e.g. [Dishonoured](#), RDR1 and 2, [Mass Effect](#), [Hogwarts Legacy](#)). These games ultimately force players to make decisions about who 'they' (or their protagonist) want to be. Whether escapist or not, single player games involve us engaging with alternative versions of ourselves or affirming how we conceive of our own identify. While one inevitably takes elements of oneself into games worlds, we may perform that identity similarly or differently depending on the nature of the game and the kinds of decisions a game forces us to make. A lot of games involve players making moral choices, while seeing and 'feeling' the impacts of their actions on themselves, the game-world, and their non-playable inhabitants.

What adds complexity and weight to these complex moral in-game decisions is the parasociality involved in singleplayer games. Like film and tv, players routinely develop 'attachment' and feeling for people, animals and things that aren't 'real'. 'Dogmeat' a canine companion in the game 'Fallout 4' has become a beloved character. A mechanic of the game forces you to choose a singular companion to follow you throughout your journey, of which there are many. Players have become so attached to this character, modders have redesigned the game to allow you to retain 'dogmeat' as your companion while also selecting another. First uploaded by 'Valdaci1' to Nexus Mods in 2016, this user-generated modification has been downloaded by nearly 2.5 million players since ([Nexus Mods](#) 2024). We suggest that the video game presents a compelling case for the study of parasociality in the context of deviance by virtue of the player/character interaction in gameworlds which makes for a powerful medium for identification and cultural representation. Players' investment in characters, the sensory experiences of play (light and dark, sound and silence, the tactile feedback of heartbeats and violence), in tandem with the decisions and experience of the stories themselves can generate profound emotional experiences of excitement, happiness, melancholy and grief which may surpass that of the medium of film and television. These worlds are often not fully offline and may include the engagement with co-present friends or online groups, instructional videos and or community commentary all of which contributed to shared practice of experience and play. Avatars can come to embody the very real player 2 that moves them around a map, further imbuing stories with genuine and personal emotional investment.

All of the above is inevitably connected with the power of games to construct, reinforce or challenge social and cultural experiences about the world and contemporary global issues. In games like Call of Duty and Medal of Honour, players are forced to consider the 'rightness' of US and UK military intervention abroad at different periods in time, all while providing historical and social context. There is a need for greater criminological engagements with games as culture in the same way that film, television, and media is analysed to unpack their engagement with and contribution to mainstream values and power structures. Questions ought to be raised about whether games can contribute to counter-visual strategies and exert cultural power by using strong female leads (e.g. Aloy in [Horizon Zero Dawn](#)), representing ethnic diversity (Carl Johnson in GTA, Bayek in [Assassins Creed: Origins](#)) narrative devices, and alternative representations of history and current events. Increasingly single and multiplayer games enable players to create their characters with greater levels of avatar detail, which has led to debates about the extent to which people should expect to be represented in all games, or whether this is desirable in games rooted in true events. Some games prioritise historical authenticity and accuracy where campaigns reflect events inspired by history (e.g. [Medal of Honour](#)), while others wholly fictitious give players complete control over protagonists identities (e.g. [Cyberpunk](#)). Others (often in the fantasy genre) deploy opaque protagonists whose identities are wholly open to the interpretation of the player. Video games both online and single player are increasingly popular sites where people engage in and navigate identity politics. Through game streaming and sharing services like [Twitch](#) and YouTube, they also

become potent sites in which to foster opposition and engage in resistance to oppressive narratives.

### **Future directions**

The Digital Deviance Digital Compliance workshops achieved several of its primary aims. First, it has succeeded in drawing together a range of SCCJR institutions and associates to consider the video game and how criminology might engage more meaningfully with it as a site of research and theory. Second, through workshops and collaboration, the discussants have identified a plethora of opportunities presented by video games for empirical research, conceptual and theoretical development. In doing so, it became apparent that within the SCCJR there is a multi-disciplinary critical mass of scholars with shared interests and inclinations who are well equipped to contribute to this area. We shared the view that discourse on the relationship between video games and crime has, for too long, been over simplified and reductionist and that criminological scholarship provides ample opportunity to add nuance and appreciate the pro-social and counter cultural qualities offered by video games. The next step will be to share our report with contributing colleagues and share our findings at the next relevant future lab to scope appetite for future research and writing projects across the centre.

### **Participating Scholars**

We are grateful to everyone who engaged in the workshops and for their contributions to the discussions and topic outlines. They are:

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