Of Sins, Vices and *Pecados*: The Cultural Context of Videogame Play

Thomas Hugh Apperley

Department of Media and Communication
University of Melbourne
Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Using a case study of *Grand Theft Auto 3: Vice City*, this chapter examines the cultural context of videogame consumption in Caracas, Venezuela in Summer 2005. Using data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation and interviews over that period, it analyzes the features of *Vice City* that made it the most frequently played single player game in Internet cafés. We argue that it is not so much the game's graphic or narrative elements, but its flexibility in terms of styles and approaches to play that led to it becoming a standard feature of Venezuelan gaming life. The game caters to the requirements of the intense social space of offline interactions within the Internet café and supersedes the limitations and difficulties imposed by various social, economic and technological factors affecting the game playing audience in Venezuela.

Keywords: computer games, creative industries, cybercafés, digital games, ethnography, *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City*, mediascape, play, piracy, Venezuela, videogames.

As I entered the cybercafé, several pairs of eyes turned to me with relief. I had entered at a crucial point in a dispute that the parties felt I could easily resolve. Café owner José-Manuel, who, like many Venezuelans, was fluent in North American English, asked me: “Ay man! Does ‘vice’ mean *pecado*?” Several other interested parties looked towards me from their computers, *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* (2003, Rockstar Games), displayed conspicuously on their screens. This kind of discussion often took place in the café, and José-Manuel’s expertise in English was often called for when explaining the operation of software and games or translating websites. On several occasions during my visits there, I had also been enlisted into various discussions of how to translate song lyrics – from Frank Sinatra to Cypress Hill – from English to Spanish, but this was a situation in which even with my basic grasp of Spanish, I realized the translation did not adequately convey the nuance of the word chosen in English. *Pecado* literally translates as “sin” and I felt that another word should be equivocal with vice in Spanish. In the end I could only suggest *pecadillo*, but this experience led me to think that if the game’s title was the starting point for understanding the game, the Venezuelans had a starting point different from my own. This chapter assesses the connection between context and understanding in videogame play in Venezuela, using *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* as a case study. We begin with an examination of the emerging practices of play, followed by a critical evaluation of conditions and contexts in which play takes place in Venezuela, thereby establishing the deeper cultural stakes in said practice.

Although not a sustainable industry in many regions of the world, videogame

manufacture is globally viable, unequal practices notwithstanding. The industry's publishing and software development branches are located primarily in North America and Japan (Kerr, 2006: 155), rendering it difficult for smaller first world economies such as Ireland (Kerr and Boyle, 2003) and developing countries like Venezuela (Lugo et al., 2003) to enter entertainment software markets. Hardware, however, is manufactured under license mostly in "the South," a situation that is apparently expected to persist (Lugo et al., 2003). Despite this global inequality in production ability, it is evident that videogames have been widely accepted into global leisure practices. A substantial number of studies focus on videogame audiences in North America and several others detail local videogame practices in Australia (Durkin and Aisbett, 1999; Flynn, 2003; Swalwell, 2006), Britain and Japan (Colwell and Kato, 2005), Germany (Fromme, 2003) and the Netherlands (Jansz and Martens, 2005). This chapter seeks to further redress this bias towards first world countries by examining videogame practices in Venezuela, exemplifying the precarious status of digital play in countries of the "South." At the forefront of this discussion is the issue of videogame piracy, that in many countries constitutes a tactical response to unequal levels of access (De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005). As Jansz and Martens note in their study "Gaming at a LAN event: the social context of playing video games" (2005: 351), access to hardware is a key barrier limiting participation in videogame play. The cost of software, however, may be effectively mitigated through piracy. These conditions, combined with the increasingly widespread cheap access of public internet connections in many countries (in the form of cybercafés), create an environment in which videogame play is a readily available pastime.

Local examinations of videogame play can only be effective if based on localized or situated approaches. In this respect, my research on Venezuela is based on four months of ethnographic fieldwork in a cybercafé in the Caracas suburb of San Bernardino, in the municipal district of Libertrador. My project was inspired by Lori Kendall's project on BlueSky, a Multi-User Dimension (MUD), published as *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online* (2002). Her study moves away from online spaces as virtual and experimental spaces to examine the way that BlueSky's users regarded it in a continuum with offline contact and activities and re-inscribed offline issues of power and identity into the virtual space of the MUD. My research has also focused on this integration of online and offline activities, determining how the material conditions of the play experience impact on contextualization by its players. The recent and prominent game ethnography *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (2006: 17), by T. L. Taylor begins with the social activities of the players online, examining how online gaming involves increasing amounts of what she calls *extra-game activities*. Taylor's approach has much in common with what Christine Hine describes as a *virtual ethnography* – an online ethnographic study focused on virtual cultures (2000). This study, however, takes the offline as a starting point and examines how the *embedded local context of play* shapes the experience and meaning of play in a virtual world.

CYBER CAFÉ AVILA

Cyber Café Avila is located in an almost entirely residential area of San Bernardino, consisting of a mixture of large apartment buildings, smaller apartment buildings, and houses. The view up the street to the north is dominated by El Avila, the mountain that overlooks Caracas, and gives the café its name. The café is a part of a

larger building, consisting of individual apartments. Unlike the other two apartments, the café is painted blue and bears two signs, one announcing that it is a cybercafé and the other advertising 7-Up. A locked and barred security door blocks the entrance to the café. To enter, the customer must ring the bell. The door is watched from the main counter via a webcam. Usually, the door is answered promptly, but at other times it is slower, as café workers negotiate regarding the relative importance of the tasks they are conducting. This may take some time and occasionally customers will take pity on the person waiting, momentarily tearing themselves from their computers to let them in, especially if it is raining. During the café's working hours – approximately 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM – it would have up to four employees and as many as twenty customers, who often shared computers or were present only to purchase goods or services provided by the café rather than to use one of the available computers.

The café consists of one long narrow room with a concrete floor, walls and ceiling. Most of the room is painted white, but some features, such as pillars and beams, are painted either adobe or blue, while the floor is painted red. The large television set mounted on one wall is rarely on. The walls are decorated with posters of cars, a film poster for *8 Mile* (2002, Hanson), a *Half-Life: Counter-Strike* (2000, Valve Software) poster and an advertisement for inkjet printers. Along each of the long walls were six computers on cheap chipboard desks, each with a plastic chair in front of it. The screens faced away from the walls, apart from the two computers which were the farthest from the door to the street, which were at right angles to the other computers, facing towards the entry door. These two also had slightly larger desks. Directly behind these two computers was the counter where people came to pay, at which were

stationed a black and white and a color printer and the cybercafé's server. Behind this desk was a rack with snacks and candy, a refrigerator containing soft drinks and yogurt and a shelf full of various supplies for the café, including a large number of boxes filled with CD-ROMs. The back wall had a concertina door with a *prohibito el paso* sign. leading into what had once been a bathroom but was now used for storage, mainly of cleaning products.

A key difference in gaming consumption patterns between Venezuela and locations already documented is the preponderance of public consumption, that becomes a key issue in terms of gender-based access to videogames. In *Moral Kombat and Computer Game Girls*, Helen Cunningham suggests that private-sphere console-based play creates a niche in which girls are able to explore videogame play. She perceives a certain benefit in this situation, as "it is vital that girls are included in these arenas where familiarity with new technology is established" (Cunningham, 2000: 221). In this case, girls and women were inclined to participate in gaming in public, if they wished to participate in the activity at all, because such games were generally used in public spaces, owing to the very high cost of private ownership. *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* was one of the few games commonly played by young women in Venezuela.

Although it is a single player game, female players usually played in groups, either sharing the computer with another during play or with a larger group of people all playing the same game and sharing the humor and excitement of the experience. The groups typically consisted of high school aged boys and girls; people from outside the playing group often responded to their remarks or were drawn in briefly to provide

assistance with a difficult part of the game. One particular point of discussion that was often the focus of communication was the use of various "cheat codes" to facilitate progress within the game, demonstrating the differential approaches to expert and novice play. Negotiation of this difference remains an importance source of socialization between genders in the social milieu of the cybercafé, an observation consistent with Yates and Littleton's contention in *Understanding Computer Game Cultures: A Situated Approach* that women and girls enjoy playing videogames because of the social pleasures associated with the activity (Yates and Littleton, 2001). Both the actual play and the discussion of play of *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* had key roles in facilitating the social milieu of Cyber Café Avila.

While *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* has an obvious narrative progress, demonstrated through numerous cut scenes and missions with clear objectives, it was apparent that this was not a key attraction of play at Cyber Café Avila. The social manner in which the game was played often meant that headphones were eschewed so that people could hear the contemporary Latino music played in the café, as well as to facilitate socialization. Another factor contributing to this soundless style of play was a general distaste for the damage that headphones caused to coiffures, as overtly demonstrated by the young women playing. *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* can be played without sound: During play, the key audio signal is the sound of a police siren, indicating that police cars are chasing the player. This situation is to be avoided, as capture means failure of the current mission. It is not necessary to listen for the sirens, however, as the screen also indicates when the player has become the object of police pursuit.

The narrative sequences are clearly marked, so that if players so desired, they could temporarily put on their headphones or read the Spanish subtitles at the bottom of the screen. When the computer signaled that a non-interactive narrative sequence was about to begin, players would often look away from the screen, either to see how others were proceeding with the game or to talk to friends. Many players ignored the narrative sequences altogether, taking advantage of the open play available in the large virtual space the game presents. In these cases, players often delighted in exploring new areas and discovering previously unknown feats. An unusual discovery would often create a brief hubbub in the café, as many players left their own games to crowd around the screen of the player who had just discovered a flyable helicopter, a new way to jump the canal or beach ball to bounce. I suggest that this open style of play makes the game more attractive in the context of public consumption, as following the narrative is long and accumulative, meaning that players will probably need to save their game status more than once to complete the game. This is a problem in a public space, as players may have difficulty accessing the same computers when they return and have no guarantee that their records have not been erased or overwritten in the meantime. In *Half-Real: Computer Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Jesper Juul argues that the save function has been a crucial factor in the evolution of computer games because it allows games to increase the size and variety of challenges while still catering to different skill levels among players (Juul, 2005: 111). In the case of *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City*, the experience accumulated through play can be transferred across sessions because the virtual world of Vice City remains the same. By creating a game that may be played in an open and non-linear fashion, Rockstar has made the

experiences of play available to all, rather than only to those who have the time and digital storage space to progress through the game's stages. The structure of the game facilitates socialization because the evenness of access means that knowledge transfer between expert and novice players plays a significant role, as many of the experiences of play are based on navigation, rendering "where to go" as important as "what to do."

Game play was not the exclusive activity of many of the people who played *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* at the café. While a few players were inclined to play the game exclusively for extended periods of time, many others played it for short bursts, interspersed by play of other games or other Internet activities, particularly instant messaging or email. As the main mobile phone network, Movilnet, also offered free computer-to-mobile messaging over the Internet, sending text messages was also common. People typically paid for one hour in advance, especially school-aged children and teenagers who would visit the café on their way to or from school. The price of 1200 Bolivars (55 US cents) per hour was competitive with those of other sources of entertainment, as well as cybercafé prices in the more commercial areas of Caracas, that might have charged as much as 2100 Bolivars (approximately US$1) an hour in mid-2005. The young game players developed many strategies to circumvent the price barriers they confronted, typically by sharing computers during play – either by taking turns or, in many cases, having one or two observers comment and offer advice while another played. As a result, there would often be more than 20 people in the small café, even though there were only 11-12 working computers. This situation further entrenched the tendency toward social interactivity at the café: Observers sometimes became bored with what their playing companion was doing and started to

observe other players, making comments and asking questions about what they were doing, sparking new connections and relations among the people frequenting the café.

The social milieu of Cyber Café Avila demonstrates the social dimension of videogame play. James Newman in *Videogames* (2004: 57-58) and Mia Consalvo in *Zelda 64 and Videogame Fans: A Walkthrough of Games, Intertextuality and Narrative* (2003: 331) both argue that videogame play takes place in a nexus of play and the culture of videogames, largely produced by players. Consalvo claims that game FAQs (frequently asked questions) and walkthroughs demonstrate how even the experience of playing alone and in private is shaped and influenced by the broader social practices of videogaming. In *The Nature of Computer Games: Play as Semiosis*, David Myers (2003: 178) suggests that the communications enabled by the Internet underlie the manner in which play is contextualized, claiming that part of play consists of a process of incorporation into a collective negotiated social system that gives it meaning. The cybercafé situation differs only in the sense that the contact, knowledge sharing and contextualization are all face-to-face and live, engendering social contact that extends outside the ephemeral moment of play itself. Players extended the sociality of the cybercafé into the street, congregating for extended periods on the pavement outside. Often, people would be waiting there when the café opened at 7:00 AM; at times, groups would remain on the steps talking after it closed at 7:00 PM. Even when the café was unexpectedly closed during a power failure, the regulars still waited outside to meet their friends and acquaintances and stayed there talking for hours – and not necessarily about game play. Once the next meeting time and location had been arranged, the discussion turned to more general topics – school, homework, gossip,

relationships and sports. The small groups that formed outside the café on the street drew in other passersby, as patrons recognized and hailed school colleagues, neighbors, friends and relatives. These groups melded with parents picking up children from the naval school across the street; firemen taking their lunch break; street entrepreneurs peddling ice cream, *yuca*, or *empanadas*; off-duty soldiers and grubby mechanics from the garage next door. I suggest that the extension of the sociality of play into the street outside follows Johan Huizinga's observation in *Homo Ludens: A Study in the Play Element of Culture* (1970: 31) that communities formed through play often endured after its cessation. While play was not confined to the virtual worlds of videogames, the sociality it engendered took videogame play into new contexts and myriad locations.

VENEZUELA'S AMBIVALENT GLOBAL IMAGINARY

Underlying the sociality of *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* play is a deeply seated ambivalence to the power dynamic of the global information networks through which it flows. Venezuela has a particular mediascape and the role that videogames have in that mediascape is important, as they constitute a key area of global connectivity, a part of the media that is not dominated by the immediate political concerns of the deeply divisive partisan struggle between Chávez and his opponents. The mediascape, explains Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996: 35): "provide[s]… …large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world." It constitutes a site offering resources for the individual to construct imagined worlds and possible lives. If transformation of the mediascape by "new" forms of digital media – of which videogames are but one manifestation – accelerates the scale at which media is both produced and consumed, then: '[m]ore

persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms' (Appadurai, 2006: 53-4). In this schema, imagination plays a key role in the contemporary media environment. Imagination, to Appadurai, is a negotiation between "sites of agency" – the individual – and "globally defined fields of possibility" (p. 31). The abundance of imaginary worlds portrayed by the media creates a greater margin of flexibility for individuals to imagine possible lives. In this sense, *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* is significant in the Venezuelan context because it presents a moment of mutual transformation and hybridity between North America and Latin America in the context of a contested power dynamic.

Through its contents, themes and æsthetics, the game strongly suggests that it is an imaginary – and occasionally parodic – version of 1980s Miami. In *Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice City* (2006: 165), Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum argue that Vice City is a "symbolic representation" of Miami. *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* draws on many representations of Miami from North American popular culture, in particular Bogost and Klainbaum argue, the film *Scarface* (1983, De Palma), and the 1980s television series *Miami Vice* (2006: 171). The game also uses more general imagery of Miami, associations with crime, drugs and – importantly – the creolization of North American culture. Bogost and Klainbaum (2006: 170) also earmark this hybridity, noting that Miami is presented as "a glamorous tropical gateway" between the "streets of New York and the jungles of South America." In Venezuelan culture, Miami has its own symbolic meaning that I suggest feeds the popularity of the game, rooted not only in the place that is represented but also in

the historic period. Miami was transformed by Latin culture during the 1980s, the time period of *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City*. The times were characterized by a creolization of culture caused by a large influx of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. This cultural transformation rejuvenated the city's cultural and creative industries, according Miami status as what George Yúdice in *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (2003: 196) critically refers to as the "cultural capital of Latin America."

For Venezuela, the 1980s were the last years of oil wealth and good relations with the USA – a period often regarded with some degree of nostalgia. At that time, even the middle class took holidays to Miami to shop for clothes and electronics. This heyday is long gone for all but the most elite of Venezuela's wealthier class; since Chávez came into power, many Venezuelans fitting this category have in fact relocated to Miami. I suggest that Miami postulates a complex amalgam for the global imaginary of Venezuelans: Nostalgia for better times, a place of refuge, a tourist resort and a cultural center. It represents a shift in peripheral cultural allegiance from metropolitan Europe – Spain – to the metropolitan United States. While relations have shifted from the Old World to the New World, the connection is still characterized by an uneven power dynamic. Much of the current political tension revolves around Venezuela's complicated relations with the USA, precipitated by this shifting allegiance and the government's criticism of this dynamic.

Long-term media involvement in political partisanship has created a highly politicized media environment. Since the news media's support of and alleged

complicity in the April 2004 coup against President Hugo Chávez, the media in Venezuela have been tightly regulated, as demonstrated by Chávez's December 2006 announcement that the phone company CANTV would be nationalized, closely followed by his March 2007 refusal to renew the broadcast license of RCTV, the longest running privately owned television channel in Venezuela. Chávez's primary concern has been to create a media environment supportive of the *Revolucion Bolivariana*, that has a firm anti-American imperialism rhetoric. This program has focused largely on regulating broadcast media and newspapers, but has had little effect on the illegal cross-border flow of digital media in the form of music CDs, DVDs and videogames. Videogames offered at cybercafés arrive in public, unregulated, typically through black market street vendors and merchants who acquired copies through transnational file trading over the Internet.

While Chávez seeks to control media flow into Venezuela, videogames and other digital commodities represent a difficult area to regulate. In the case of *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City*, this is further complicated by the game's thematic focus. In *Grand Theft Video: Running and Gunning for the US Empire* (Redmond, 2006: 104), Dennis Redmond argues that the game "shine[s] a spotlight on the dark underbelly of the US Empire." The critical portrayal of America's inner cities at least poses no direct challenge to the *Revolucion Bolivariana*. The problems that arise from this portrayal of dystopic urban space dominated by violence, crime and driving take on a rather different context in Caracas. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006: 83), Alexander Galloway points out that for a game to be realistic there must be "a special congruence between the social reality depicted

in the game and the social reality known and lived by the player." Caracas is a city particularly troubled by violent crime, political unrest and a sharp division between rich and poor. While one cannot quantify the extent to which *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* is *realistic* in this context, we suggest that the context does accord widely different stakes to the game's imagery and actions, as explored by Greig De Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford in their essay *A Playful Multitude? Mobilising and Counter-Mobilising Immaterial Game Labour* (2005). They argue that playing videogames presents and replicates the logic of Antonio Hardt and Michel Negri's (2000) concept of *Empire*. The situation in Venezuela demonstrates the insidious aspect of the logic of Empire. While there is a strong anti-imperialist imperative behind intense scrutiny of media by the government, videogames have been able to insinuate themselves into the Venezuelan mediascape for two key reasons: They are conceptualized as play and therefore not considered serious and they enter the country through illegal processes (piracy), facilitated by unregulated distribution systems. Thus, despite strong opposition to global media because it is believed to be biased, videogames remain unchecked.

One aspect of Empire is potentially undermined by the centrality of piracy to play in Venezuela. For typical Venezuelans to consume this Empire product, global distribution systems must be circumvented through piracy. In most other situations, the videogame industry has been extremely successful in its "capture of counter-play" (De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005). Practices that appeared to threaten the industry's profits have – been smoothly reincorporated into its mainstream structures with remarkable consistency. Piracy, however, threatens the videogame

industry in a manner that cannot be addressed without the support of local governments. This economic challenge suggests that while the Venezuelan gamer is playing with the product of Empire, there is potential to resist its totalization.

This small margin of flexibility has extremely high stakes. Although often regarded as mere entertainment, it is also suggested that videogames have an important role in educating their users in digital literacy, enabling them to act in knowledge society (Prensky 2001; Gee, 2003; Galarneau and Zibit, 2007). In *End of Millennium* (1998), Manuel Castells argues that the increasingly central role that information capital plays in the global networked society creates and entrenches regions and areas of both inclusion and exclusion to the benefits of those networks, establishing a class of locations and people that are not valued:

> There is also exclusion of people and territories which, from the perspective of dominant interests in global, informational capitalism, shift to a position of structural irrelevance. This widespread, multiform process of social exclusion leads to the constitution of what I call, taking the liberty of a cosmic metaphor, the *black hole of informational capitalism*. These are regions of society from which, statistically speaking, there is no escape … (Castells, 1998: 162).

Even if videogames can provide an encounter with the skills necessary for twenty-first century survival, these burgeoning skills may have no constructive outlet. Videogame play, argues Julian Kücklich in *Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry* (2005), leads to the skills required to build games through the practice of *modding*. This suggests that videogames are valuable teaching and learning tools, not just in terms of learning content but in making the shift from knowledge to

creativity that is crucial to adding value in what are labeled the "creative industries" (Leadbeater, 1999: 111). Lugo et al., in *Latin America's Cultural Industries Still Play Old Games: From Donkey Kong to Banana Republic* (2002), outline the position of Venezuela vis-à-vis the creative industries, arguing that the current state of the global industry effectively excludes smaller economies from participating in videogame development. While videogame play has been able to find its niche through a minor challenge to the totality of Empire, as this chapter demonstrates, the shift between play as a creative practice and the disciplining of play to produce content for creative industries is non-existent and difficult to support in this context, suggesting that videogame play and piracy provide little leverage for extricating Venezuelan youth from the "black hole."

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates and explores the impact of context on videogame play at two levels. First, ethnographic observations of players of *Grand Theft Auto III: Vice City* in a specific location revealed that part of the game's appeal was the dovetailing of the game's physical design and the conditions in which play took place. In particular, the game's open nature fed into the extreme sociality of the *public context* of play in the cybercafé environment, allowing players to share their experiences without barriers imposed by skill or technology. By examining the context of the game at the symbolic level as well, the chapter highlights the stakes of videogame play in Venezuela. The game is representative of the country's troubled relations with its northern neighbor regarding attitudes towards globalization, with the caveat that piracy enables players to participate in global media. This situation, however, underscores the key difference

between play in Venezuela, and in the “North”: While piracy may be a tactical response to inequality, the skills learned during play do not segue easily into other industries, particularly the knowledge industries that are critical to development if Venezuela is to become a full participant in the global network society.

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