



THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE NARRATIVE IN VIDEO GAMES

The Player's Agency in *Grand Theft Auto V* Roleplay

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ABSTRACT

Grand Theft Auto (GTA) V Roleplay is a mode of its online multiplayer version that transforms the narrative, interaction, and original mechanics. Five server types (Drift, Race, Players Versus Players, Players Versus Environment and Roleplay) are studied to determine what possibilities each offers and what kind of agency the player achieves. Each category builds a different experience by implementing narrative events, factions, or social interactions. Thus, it is determined that, although GTA Roleplay became popular thanks to influencers, it continues to develop thanks to the engagement of its players.

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1. Introduction

Narrative is fundamental to the enjoyment of video games and player engagement (Caroux et al., 2015). In particular, the development of characters and their involvement with the main plot is especially relevant. Interactions that build on the personality and individuality of the main characters increase identification with the narrative and presence in the virtual environment (Christy & Fox, 2016). Likewise, it has been seen how in recent years online gaming increases the intrinsic motivation of players with the narrative (Merhi, 2016). One of the great attractions of current video games is the development of their story and gameplay through social interactions. Online gaming has become a medium by which players communicate and share experiences, even if anonymously (Abbasi et al., 2023).

Another relevant concept is player agency. This idea has been defined in different research (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2009) and encompasses various aspects of a video game. In principle, agency is related to the range of interactions available to a player at any given moment. Although it also covers the decision to perform one interaction or another, which reveals the player's intention and thus the cognitive or affective meaning it has for him/her (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2016). Furthermore, agency concept considers whether these actions produce effects on the development of the narrative and gameplay, so that it changes each personal experience.

With this perspective, this study focuses on Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V) from publisher Rockstar. This title is the second most successful video game in history as, with more than 190 million copies sold as of November 2023 since its release in 2013 (Gonzalez, 2023). GTA V belongs to the action-adventure genre, with open-world and third-person shooter elements. This video game consists of a main campaign starring three characters who engage in criminal activities to get rich and solve their personal problems. This narrative is mainly based on the execution of violent acts as a satire of the American ideal and culture (Maloney, 2016). But beyond this story, GTA V features a wealth of interactions that online players can develop in the fictional city of Los Santos.

GTA V online takes place on several servers, both the publisher's own and those of the fans. Players can customize the appearance of their characters and vehicles, as well as buy property within the city. In this open world they have total freedom to explore the map and interact with other players and NPCs (non-player characters). The online game focuses on a wide range of missions, both competitive and cooperative, such as heists, robberies, deathmatches and street racing. Other secondary activities that simulate real life are also offered, such as scuba diving, airplane piloting, golf, or gambling. In addition, Rockstar creates temporary events with special missions that add new content for online players.

However, this work does not focus on GTA V online's narrative, which, however much variety it offers, is still limited by Rockstar's vision. This study focuses on an online game mode developed by the players themselves, known as GTA Roleplay. Each user creates a role for their character and must interpret it in their gameplay while following a story. Each server is an independent ecosystem with varying sizes of communities and different rules that guide the narrative towards more fantasy or life-like representations (Antón, 2020).

This game mode already existed since GTA III (2001) and was continued in GTA IV (2008). The Roleplay community was quite small, the gameplay possibilities more limited and even players started Roleplaying through text commands (Garro, 2020). However, in recent years GTA Roleplay has exponentially increased its visibility and the number of players involved. It is partly due to new audiovisual products (Kavanagh, 2024) such as season 4 of *Stranger Things* (2022) and the movie *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* (2023). Therefore, traditional role-playing games and concepts such as game master and customized adventures have become popular (Goria, 2017).

Although primarily GTA V Roleplay has become known thanks to streamers and content creators around the world who started playing and broadcasting it in 2018 (Pastoriza, 2024). In Spain, two servers stood out: Marbella Vice, founded by Ibai Llanos and Jacky, and Infames RP, created by AuronPlay, Perxita and Reborn. The fact that these streamers with millions of followers began to interpret and share their stories meant a boom in GTA V Roleplay that led to the creation of a multitude of new servers. This situation diversified into different variants of servers and old Roleplay players and new ones had to adapt to this wave of curiosity (Garro, 2020).

2. Objectives

The main objective of this study is the analysis of the new narrative that is created in GTA Roleplay and its comparison with the original narrative that the publisher Rockstar proposed for the online game. It is studied whether GTA V Roleplay continues the same plot, with a gameplay focused on violence (Verdú, 2023), or whether it moves out of those patterns. Special consideration is given to the effect of player agency and online socialization on Roleplay. Players can choose to act according to their innate desires and engage in violence because it is a virtual world (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2015) or they can comply with the rules that each server imposes.

In this way, it will be possible to discern whether player agency and prosocial behaviors change not only GTA V narrative, but also its gameplay. This video game is classified within the action-adventure, shooter, and open-world genre. However, if the Roleplay changes its functionality and the way of interacting, it could again be defined as an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game). This type of games focuses on players creating an avatar that evolves and interacts with other player's avatars within a virtual world as different events take place (Billieux et al., 2013).

3. Methodology

The analysis of GTA V Roleplay servers is performed on FiveM, the most popular free "mod client" for playing on servers outside Rockstar's network (Gonzalez, 2021). The servers currently operating in Spain and found thanks to the TrackyServer website are examined. With the object of study narrowed down, the next step is classifying them according to the type of experience they offer to online players. It is expected to determine which is the most popular type of server and its ability to transform the narrative and gameplay of GTA V.

In order to analyze the servers, it is necessary to define the methodology concerning video game design that is applied in this work. The study of online agency and socialization relates to the narrative developed by players, the possibilities for virtual environment interaction, and the structure of game mechanics (Stamenković et al., 2017). These elements of the online game will appear on different servers with varied frequencies, patterns, and depth, while interrelating to each other. Everything will depend on the individual rules of each, the role of the players and their game flow in the virtual ecosystem (Stamenković & Wildfeuer, 2021).

Within each server, it is analyzed whether the game is intrinsically prosocial and enhances interactions between players (Grey, 2009). It is also interesting to observe whether each person has individual freedom to develop his or her own story or must obey some laws and exercise self-control (Denham & Spokes, 2018). Overall, it will be possible to define whether each game mode follows the violent gameplay of GTA V or whether players are transformed into "moral beings" (Sicart, 2011). This would mean that they rely on their own agency to seek different experiences that are not constrained by the original video game design (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2015).

Similarly, each server can set the interaction possibilities in the virtual environment, which will substantially modify the player's agency (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2016). They may have very strict goals set that turn the virtual space to avoid any distraction from the basic mechanics (Germov & Poole, 2020). On the other hand, modifications made to the open world may add deeper interpretations to it than the original design of the game map. This will transform the view of this world, affecting the emotional effect on the player and their understanding of the narrative (Stamenković & Wildfeuer, 2021).

To classify these aspects of narrative and interactions in GTA V Roleplay according to player agency, the framework developed by Cole & Gillies (2019) is applied:

- Actual mechanical agency (AMA): is the direct effect of player actions and decisions on the game system and its mechanics (but not on the narrative).
- Actual fictional agency (AFA): is the effect on the development of the narrative, either on the main plot or on the characters' story, through the player's interactions.
- Interpretive mechanical (IMA): is the effect on the player after encouraging him/her to contemplate their actions in the game and give them a moral value, judgment or meaning.

- Interpretive fictional (IFA): is the effect on the player to encourage him/her to construct their own version and interpretation of the fiction, the story and/or the characters to achieve a deeper emotional experience.

However, this classification does not include the mechanic's structure. This aspect has been studied for decades and taxonomies have been formulated since the publications of Bartle (1996) or Weber and Shaw (2009). For this paper, the most evolved classification developed by Yee (2016) and based on thousands of respondents will be adopted:

- Action: the game is based on the excitement of the moment, the constant action and surprise, and the maximum possible destruction of the virtual environment.
- Social: the game is focused on two aspects, or it combines them, the competitive one that seeks to lead the rankings against other players, and the community based on interaction and team building.
- Mastery: the game is centered on the maximum difficulty to achieve the challenges through practice or the use of strategies in a complicated gameplay in the long term.
- Achievement: the game is focused on completing all the missions and achieving the maximum of collectibles while developing a powerful character.
- Immersion: the game is a way to develop an interesting narrative and live the fantasy of a new role and a new world.
- Creativity: the game is based on exploration and experimentation of the virtual environment, as well as customization possibilities within the design.

4. Analysis

The Spain servers found on the TrackyServer website are a total of 65. These are classified by the service itself and its users into five types: Drift, Race, PVP (Player Versus Player), PVE (Player Versus Environment) and RP (Roleplay). However, the classification of a server is not limited to a single type, instead can combine all five depending on the gameplay that users have decided to develop. Table 1 reflects this categorization, indicating in each cell how many of these 65 servers combine two types. The diagonal is reserved for those servers that only focus on one of these categories.

Table 1. Combination of server categories

Category	Drift	Race	PVP	PVE	RP
Drift	0	11	7	2	13
Race	11	0	9	5	14
PVP	7	9	1	5	13
PVE	2	5	5	0	6
RP	13	14	13	6	43

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

Drift-centric servers focus on players' abilities to perform controlled drifting maneuvers, maintain precise driving in high-speed corners and synchronize movements with other drivers. Mastering these abilities requires a lot of practice playing GTA V and a good understanding of vehicle physics. The gameplay on these servers is not only focused on competitions or specific Drift challenges. In addition to these events, players can enjoy practicing free Drifting in the open world and sharing tips and tricks with the community. Also important is the customization of vehicles to improve Drift performance or the creation of new tracks to pose new challenges and experiences on the server.

Race-centric servers are essentially similar to Drift, but the skills required by players are more focused on racing competition and stunt performance. Drifting requires controlling vehicle physics, special skills such as turbo, knowledge of tracks, and the ability to adapt and react to competitors and environmental conditions. Otherwise, gameplay focuses on competing in races or stunt events with different vehicles, creating new tracks, and upgrading and customizing vehicles for the various challenges on the server.

Regarding these Drift and Race servers, there are only 2 (3%) that do not include the Roleplay label and that, in addition, combine these categories with PVE. Thus, it can be determined that almost all of the servers that offer vehicle-centric gameplay also develop character Roleplay. The total number of servers for both categories is almost the same, 14 (22%) for Race and 13 (20%) for Drift, and 11 (17%) of them play both modes at the same time. Another noteworthy trend is that Race servers combine PVP and PVE gameplay more than Drift communities.

PVP-focused servers may encourage solo play or cooperative and competitive play. The main events on these servers are combat with varied weapons, vehicles and skills, all type of criminal activities such as bank robberies or armored car assaults, and control of resources in key areas of the open world. These challenges can be faced by individual players in a one-on-one or all-against-all situation, or clans can be established to compete cooperatively. This situation will lead to the formation of temporary or permanent alliances, as well as betrayal, to achieve objectives at the expense of other players.

PVE servers are geared towards cooperative play to solve missions and tasks offered by GTA V online. These challenges can involve NPCs to perform escort or hostage rescue missions. To accomplish these common goals, clans of players will be established. At the same time, they organize social events or large-scale in-game projects. On these servers, interactions with the open world are essential, whether it be for recreational activities with their community, or for environmental challenges and random events that make them work together.

In addition to these features, in both PVE and PVP, customization of playable characters and vehicles is still present. These interactions are still necessary to improve players' performance and to face missions. This customization is also important to share a personalized identity that increases group cohesion.

Analyzing the total sample, there are more PVP servers (15, 23%) than PVE (9, 14%). In addition, of these PVP and PVE servers, there are only 4 out of 65 (6%) that are not Roleplay: one is exclusively PVP, another one mixes PVP and PVE and the 2 mentioned above combine Drift, Race and PVE. These servers are categorized with different combinations between the 5 types (Roleplay, Drift and Race PVP and PVE), but there are only 5 (8%) that combine PVP and PVE in some form.

Finally, Roleplay servers give the opportunity to play a character and develop their story based on their personality and goals. These characters can correspond to a wide variety of roles such as civilians, criminals, police officers, business owners or doctors. Players have to fulfill objectives, both personal and general, which will depend on the server and community events. Moderators acting as game masters will oversee the development of the narrative within this interplay between characters. This will ensure the evolution of the roles with respect to the rules of the server.

With respect to these rules and the narrative that is developed, three types of servers can be distinguished:

- Real-life server: players are immersed in a simulation of everyday life, with real-world roles and activities. The gameplay focuses on interaction with other characters (players and NPCs) in community events, recreational activities, business and job management.
- Themed server: individual and community narrative focuses on a specific open world activity. This role can be the original role of the game itself, forming a mafia, or for example playing as law enforcement or emergency services.
- Custom role server: players stick to a game system designed for the community as a whole. Game masters create customized missions and events to test players' skills and develop their narrative. To create these interactions, certain economy and progression systems are used, as well as mods that can completely transform the open world.

The majority of the analyzed servers are exclusively Roleplay servers (43, 66%) and are divided as custom role (29, 47%), real-life (8, 12%) and themed servers (6, 9%). Of the other 22 (34%) servers that are combined with other categories, the 13 (20%) PVP servers, which coincide with PVE, are themed servers. The remaining servers that combine Drift and Race with Roleplay are divided into themed Roleplay (6, 9%) and real-life type (3, 5%).

5. Results

Following, the foundations of GTA V are analysed according to the methodology developed with respect to the narrative developed by the characters, the possibilities of interaction and the mechanics' structure. Next, this same methodology is applied to the online categories resulting from the analysis. They will also be compared with the original video game to discern how the online community is able to change them. However, the analysis of these categories will not repeat what was found in the GTA V online bases, instead will focus on the particularities of each one. This is decided because any GTA V server has these features, unless the moderators have restricted them, so the study tries to avoid repeating them.

5.1. The basics of gameplay in the original GTA V online

The narrative of GTA V online does not follow a linear story, instead players must complete a series of missions in which they are criminals who want to increase their reputation. From time to time, events and updates are introduced that expand this narrative and affect the open world. This type of development does not provide AFA because players do not affect gameplay, nor IMA because no moral value is given to the story, nor IFA because they cannot construct their own narrative. Player immersion is limited to this criminal world posed by Rockstar.

GTA V online interactions occur with NPCs participating in missions or random moments such as street fights and robberies, as well as in the development of commercial and recreational activities. Online interaction with players can take place via voice or text chat, which is essential for coordination in group events and missions. Interactions between players also occur in combat and other competitive activities. Thus, social play, both cooperative and competitive, is encouraged. However, while there are several possibilities for interaction in the environment and character or vehicle customization, these are not really relevant to the narrative or gameplay.

The mechanics of GTA V online are mainly focused on vehicle driving and combat with a variety of weapons. There are indeed other recreational activities, but they are hardly relevant in comparison to the criminal activity nor are they equally enjoyable. Therefore, the gameplay is determined and offers no AMA to the player. The ultimate goal of mission progression is the enrichment of the player-controlled character. Therefore, the game is focused on the action of the moment and the achievement in developing a mafia boss.

5.2. Creativity and control in Drift and Race gameplay

The Drift and Race servers are studied together due to their similarities in focusing the gameplay on vehicle handling. These modes virtually eliminate the narrative of GTA V online, hence no AFA is produced. Neither do IMA or IFA occur because there is no moral assessment or interpretation of the gameplay. On the other hand, immersion is focused solely on this world of driving.

Interactions are with players and are mainly competitive. In both categories they interact to win races or get the highest score for the handling of their vehicles. On Drift servers, however, cooperation does occur when players interact to teach each other tricks. Therefore, these servers belong to the social game type. Likewise, interaction with the environment becomes relevant when they build their own tracks to drive, transforming the open world. This is where the creativity of each player comes in to customize their spaces and vehicles according to their preferences.

The predominant mechanics in the Drift and Race servers are all those related to driving and customizing tracks and vehicles. Because of this decision to focus the game, the AMA is produced by changing the gameplay of the original GTA V online. And by focusing on racing and stunts the type of gameplay can be defined as: 1) action by the excitement of the moment, 2) mastery by the need for practice in the face of difficulty and high competition, and 3) achievement by getting better scores than the rest of the players.

5.3. Increased agency on PVP and PVE servers

In principle, the narrative of PVP and PVE servers could be considered practically the same as in GTA V online as it focuses on criminal activities. Immersion takes place in the same mafia-dominated world

and no IFA occurs because there is no distinct interpretation of this fiction. However, the organization of players to perform these missions changes the focus of the story and provides AFA to the participants. Likewise, the development of alliances and betrayals makes players must consider the value of their actions and feel IMA.

In these servers the social game type is mainly enhanced. In PVE this social game will be only cooperative because the players only face NPCs and the virtual environment. In this category, interaction with the environment and creativity are not important. On the other hand, in PVP there will be cooperative play within the clan and competitive play against other clans. Here interactions with the environment will become more relevant when conquering areas within the open world and having to defend them from enemies. Likewise, although it is not so important, the customization of a group identity will be sought.

In the PVP and PVE servers, combat mechanics with weapons predominate in the confrontation against in-game events or against other clans. Only in the PVP category does AMA occur because player decisions in competition with other clans change gameplay in a way that GTA V online cannot predict. Although regarding the game types, they are the same as in the original video game: action and achievement.

5.4. Player agency on Roleplay servers

Narrative is the aspect that changes the most in Roleplay servers compared to GTA V online. In addition, the 3 types within this category are analysed. Regarding the game rules, there are servers that have very strict rules such as real-life servers, where players cannot use the combat and driving mechanics that the game is oriented to. Also, the themed and custom role servers can individually decide that criminal activity will not be allowed and instead players will have to respect the law or act as police officers. However, any of these 3 types of servers can allow the freedom to continue the criminal activity and the story of the server and its characters to continue this path.

Likewise, any of these Roleplay servers will greatly increase the immersion within this narrative and open world, be it more real or fantastical. It will also generate a great deal of player agency: 1) AFA by feeling that personal decisions affect the course of the story, 2) IMA by giving a morality to the player's actions within their server and 3) IFA by building an interpretation of their own for each player within the narrative.

Roleplay servers are based on social play and again, its type will depend on the server and the norms of the community whether it is more cooperative, competitive or both. It is clear that this category requires a lot of social interactions as players have to fully play their character. Likewise, the game masters will decide to what extent interaction with the environment is important and if it is necessary to change it to recreate a setting. However, creativity is necessary at the individual level to interpret the characteristics of each character within their environment.

Finally, the mechanics of the Roleplay category will depend on each type of server and the chosen narrative, and may or may not focus on combat, driving or secondary activities. However, this does not make the single player feel AMA, as the gameplay is determined by the server. Roleplay is more focused on the mastery of achieving the character's long-term goals and the achievement of developing his character on the server. If there is action gameplay it will depend on the theme and mechanics of that community.

Table 2 below shows the results of the analysis of GTA V online and each server category.

Table 2. Compilation of the characteristics of each type of server

Category	Narrative	Interaction	Mechanics
GTA online	- No AFA, IMA or IFA - Immersion in the original criminal world	- Social: cooperative & competitive - Environmental interaction and creativity are not in focus	- Driving and combat - No AMA - Action & achievement, but no mastery
Drift	- Narrative is ignored - No AFA, IMA or IFA - Immersion in driving	- Social: cooperative & competitive - Environmental interaction with the creation of tracks	- Driving and customization - AMA

Category	Narrative	Interaction	Mechanics
		- Creativity with its tracks and vehicles	- Action, mastery & achievement
Race	- Narrative is ignored - No AFA, IMA or IFA - Immersion in driving	- Social: competitive - Environmental interaction with the creation of tracks - Creativity with its tracks and vehicles	- Driving and customization - AMA - Action, mastery & achievement
PVP	- AFA & IMA, but not IFA - Immersion in the original criminal world	- Social: cooperative & competitive - Environmental interaction with area control - Creativity with clan customization	- Combat - AMA - Action & achievement, but no mastery
PVE	- AFA & IMA, but not IFA - Immersion in the original criminal world	- Social: cooperative - Environmental interaction and creativity are not in focus	- Combat - AMA - Action & achievement, but no mastery
Roleplay	- AFA, IMA & IFA - Immersion in the own world of each server	- Social: cooperative and/or competitive - Variable environmental interaction - Creativity with character representation	- Variety of mechanics - No AMA - Mastery & achievement - Possible action

Source: own elaboration, 2024.

6. Conclusions

GTA V online represents a satire and critique of the American dream (Wills, 2021). It does this through immersive missions based on criminal activities and the mechanics of combat and reckless driving. Through its progression, the player acquires individual skills with which to play cooperatively or competitively. Thus, the player is introduced into this maelstrom of violence and action to enjoy the challenges and action proposed by Rockstar. In addition to this satirical experience, the player can also focus on accumulating money to progress in the online environment. However, these possibilities give the player little agency to make game-changing decisions.

On this basis, this paper focuses on the study of GTA V online servers. The analysis of the 65 Spanish servers found in TrackyServer shows that there are 5 categories: Drift, Race, PVP, PVE and RP. 66% of the total number are exclusively Roleplay servers and there is only one that is exclusively PVP. The remaining 32% is a combination of 2 to 5 types. It can be noted that there are more PVP servers (15, 23%) than PVE (9, 14%). Finally, the driving servers have almost the same percentage: 22% for Race and 20% for Drift.

These servers give space to different players to choose between the 5 categories according to their hobbies and their personal goals. GTA Roleplay gives the freedom so that they no longer have to follow the original design of the video game. The result of the analysis developed on the narrative, the interaction possibilities and the structure of the mechanics gives rise to different classifications on what each Roleplay category offers. Drift and Race servers dispense with narrative and its agency in the story by focusing on immersion and driving mechanics. But, on the other hand, creativity in tracks and vehicles is enhanced, as well as the need to master these types of mechanics to socialize with other players.

PVP and PVE servers continue the same criminal narrative but increase the relevance of social gameplay. Interaction with other players increases immersion and agency in game development (Sharma et al., 2022). In addition, the accomplishment of cooperative activities increases the feeling of achievement (Sharma & Sharma, 2021). Along the same lines, Roleplay servers, which are the most focused on socialization, also enhance immersion and agency in the different narratives of each community. In these, the game does not have to be related to the violence of GTA, instead will depend on the rules of the server (Poremba, 2006). This category stands out for the creativity in the interpretation of the characters, although it is also true that Roleplay requires a commitment from the players. The server moderators establish objectives and a schedule to which they must adapt, and this eliminates agency in the mechanics. However, even with these restrictions, the experience is more fun and immersive (Schneider & Betrus, 2016), resembling more the MMORPG genre.

In conclusion, this paper highlights Roleplay on GTA V online servers. It demonstrates how players are able to change the narrative, the type of interaction and the mechanics through their agency in the video game. The success of this game modality is obtained not only by the boom that influencers generated in trends (Camacho, 2022), but also by the motivation and perseverance in these servers. There are players who are involved daily in this video game, not only because of the progression in the original online mode, but also because of the community building and the emotional value they get from it.

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