Pierced Windscreens and Virtual Agency: Reckless Driving Gaming as a "Safe" Playground for Vehicular Carnage

Ville Malinen

University of Jyväskylä
Seminaarinkatu 15, 40014 Jyväskylä, Finland
ville.m.j.malinen@student.jyu.fi

Keywords

Sim racing, accident, driving, media panic, simulation

INTRODUCTION

This article concept reflects the position and popularity of reckless driving in (simulative) racing and open world games with driving, regarded as virtual playgrounds for creative yet destructive player agency.

The aim is to raise discussion about the possibilities of players to cause vehicular in-game mayhem that varies broadly by the game genre, ranging for example from a primary function (vehicular combat), to secondary/optional (open world, crime), and intentional player agency (racing simulations). The aspect of driving related games to serve as physically safe and acceptable fictional escapism and simulative imitation of reality are acknowledged as appealing factors, as are differences of in-game harm done to man versus to a machine. Thus, though the levels of possible graphic gaming content vary, there has been relatively limited moral disapproval towards these games and content over the years. This is a stark contrast to games that have been treated as plausible catalysts for real-life tragedies and/or moral deterioration, such as games including firearm violence or (violent) sexual content.

As primary material for comparative research, a selection games and the nature of reckless driving within them are assessed with theme analysis (Saldaña 2016). Games included are pending but set to represent three to five different genre examples. Notions are reflected upon (rewarded) player agency, liberties, and simulated realism. Research includes reflecting the historical development of such games and literary review.

As for the different nature of these games, the settings for players are acknowledged from the position of authoritarian agencies and player liberties (Jennings 2022), and transgressive action (Mortensen & Jørgensen 2020). Broader socio-cultural significance of reckless driving ranging from rebellious leisure (Vaaranen 2004) to locally established racing culture (Richard 2022) are noted. The effects and relation of consuming driving games to real-life driving behavior (Stinchcombe et al. 2017;

Beullens & Van den Bulk 2011) are also touched upon along with the reflection of players' own psychopathology through their in-game actions (Segev et al. 2017).

Regarding historical development, games manifesting or enabling controversial, reckless driving ranges from the early examples such as the 1976 game *Death Race* by Exidy (Kocurek 2012) to modern examples such as car crash videos made with games known for their versatility and openness such as *BeamNG.drive* (BeamNG 2013). Between these examples is a temporally and genre-wise a vast realm of racing and driving games (content), including elements of spectacled machinima and simulation ranging from the 1990s Formula One simulations to parodistic indie games like *My Summer Car* (Amistech Games 2016).

The nature, depth, and response for these has varied. For example, such late 1990s spawned game franchises like *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design 1997) and *Carmageddon* (Stainless Games 1997), that tied explicit violent content to driving, gained both positive criticism and notorious outcry (Kocurek 2012). Yet notably *Grand Theft Auto* and other similar game series have expanded the in-game relationship between vehicles, player agency, and spatiality (Sihvonen 2016).

Replicating and simulating notorious violent events within games has not been unheard of and ranged from mass shootings to nuclear aftermaths in docugames affiliated with dark tourism (Hassapopoulou 2008). Yet, despite their generally contradictory and scavengery nature, these games have simultaneously addressed the virtual possibilities and limits to depict realism, memories, and question the distance and stereotypes that people have about tragic events (Hassapopoulou 2008). Similarly, the fatal racing accident of the three-time Formula One world champion Ayrton Senna during the live broadcast of the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix has been one such event re-enacted by gamers as repetitive and nostalgic videogame content. These all examples are, across game genre borders, a combination of trauma, and cultural memory transferred into simulated entertainment. They also implement in their way Deleuze's (1990) simulation theory as media productions with shared yet individual significance as (stand-alone) replications.

Thus, play associated with different media texts can be selfish, creative but also destructive action, whether destruction is a mean and/or an end of the action in different media from games to film (Myers 2007). Similarly, the transmedial relationship between media texts provides both a framework and liberties for adaptations, fan content creation, and even consumerism (Jenkins 2006).

As for driving and accidents, adaptations have been relatively rare despite strong presence in popular culture imagery. Regarding novel to film adaptations, one of the known examples in this field is J. G. Ballard's book *Crash* (1973) that was transferred into a synonymous film (1996) by David Cronenberg. Like its paragon, the film caused notable contemporary reactions and academic discussion due to its theme of combining car accidents and sex, but also addressing issues like social alienation, and the endless cycle of man seeking consumption-based pleasure, in this case through violent, physical simulation, and re-enactments (e.g., Craven 2000; Malater 2007; Sánchez Fernández 2019).

A surrounding theme of this article and its subjects are moral and media panics associated, and their evolution and affix to gaming content. Notably, open world driving games and simulated racing games have due to their nature and/or highly

realistic technical specs enabled not just liberties and hyperreal experiences, but also opened the doors for performing automotive carnage and destruction for the enjoyment of players and audiences yet dodging greater shock-value or moral panics. Vehicular carnage has not caused similar cause-effect relationship seeking explanations compared to shooting games, real-life violent behavior and/or attitudes (e.g., Pasanen 2011; Pasanen & Arjoranta 2013; Pasanen 2014).

Hence, this article seeks to deepen the understanding of the development of reckless driving in games, and their nature as media texts and cultural phenomena. Interestingly, regarding the epistemology of less structured, open-world gaming, the role of player agency, and "playground" imagination are in-line with the shift of driving culture expanding to safer virtual spheres, such as with the popularity of sim racing as a form of esports in synergy with traditional motorsports (e.g., Witkowski et al. 2021; Kovács & Szabó 2022). This simulated destructive driving seems to balance between more closed and open world games but also between reasonably realistic (yet entertaining) physics, and hyperreal, paragon-loyal authenticity.

REFERENCES

Amistech Games. 2016. My Summer Car. PC game. Amistech Games.

BeamNG. 2013. BeamNG.drive. PC game. BeamNG.

Beullens, K. and Van den Bulk, J. 2011. Predicting Young Drivers' Car Crashes: The Role of Music Video Viewing and the Playing of Driving Games. Results from a Prospective Cohort Study. *Media Psychology*. 16 (1), 88–114.

Craven, RJ. 2000. Ironic empathy in Cronenberg's *crash*: The psychodynamics of postmodern displacement from a tenuous reality. *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*. 17 (3). 187–209.

Deleuze, G. 1990. *The Logic of Sense*, translated by M. Lester and C. Stivale, edited by CV. Boundas. The Athlone Press – London.

DMA Design. 1997. *Grand Theft Auto*. PC, Playstation, and Gameboy Color game. BMG Interactive, ASC Games, Take-Two Interactive, Rockstar Games.

Exidy. 1976. *Death Race*. Arcade game. Exidy.

Hassapopoulou, M. 2008. Playing with history: collective memory, national trauma, and dark tourism in virtual reality docugames. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. 16 (4). 365–392.

Jenkins, Henry (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press.

Jennings, SC. 2022. Only you can save the world (of videogames): Authoritarian agencies in the heroism of videogame design, play, and culture. *Convergence*. 28 (2). 320–344.

Kocurek, CA. 2012. "The Agony and the Exidy: A History of Video Violence and the Legacy of Death Race". *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*. 12 (1). https://gamestudies.org/1201/articles/carly_kocurek.

Kovács, JM and Szabó, Á. 2022. Esport and simracing markets–The effects of COVID-19, difficulties and opportunities. *Society and Economy*. 44 (4). 498–514. https://doi.org/10.1556/204.2022.00012.

Malater, E. 2007. David Cronenberg's Benevolent Pathology: Technology, Trauma, and the Perverse Social Link in Crash. *Psychoanalytic Review* 94 (6). 887–903.

Mortensen, TE., Jørgensen, K. 2020. *The paradox of transgression in games*. Routledge – London – New York.

Myers, D. 2007. Plays of Destruction. *Intermédialités,* (9). 99–112.

Pasanen, T. and Arjoranta, J. 2013. "Kuka tarvitsee netin sotapelejä?" – Väkivaltaisten pelien diskurssit suomalaisessa verkkomediassa. In *Pelitutkimuksen vuosikirja 2013*, 29–57. Tampereen yliopisto.

Pasanen, T. 2011. "Hyökkäys Moskovaan!" – Tapaus Raid over Moscow Suomen ja Neuvostoliiton välisessä ulkopolitiikassa 1980-luvulla. In *Pelitutkimuksen vuosikirja 2011*, 1–11. Tampereen yliopisto.

Pasanen, T. 2014. Murhasimulaattoreista poliittiseen korrektiuteen: Väkivalta pelikohujen arkkityyppinä. In *Pelitutkimuksen vuosikirja 2014*, 8–23. Tampereen yliopisto.

Richard, PJ. 2022. Wreckers and crashers: the folklore of an Irish banger racing community. *Folk Life*. 60 (2). 135–155.

Saldaña, J. 2016. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage – Los Angeles – London – New Delhi – Singapore – Washington DC.

Sánchez FC. 2019. Heideggerian enframing, nihilism & affectlessnes in J.G.Ballard's *Crash*. *International Journal of English Studies*. 19 (1). 59–75.

Segev, A., Gabay-Weschler, H., Naar, Y., Maoz, H. and Bloch, Y. 2017. Real and virtual worlds alike: Adolescents' psychopathology is reflected in their videogame virtual behaviors. *PLoS One*. 12 (7). 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181209.

Sihvonen, T. 2016. Tilan tuntu: Grand Theft Auto V ja paikantumisen politiikat. In *Pelitutkimuksen vuosikirja 2016*, 4–20. Tampereen yliopisto.

Stainless Games. 1997. *Carmageddon*. PC, and Mac game. SCi.

Stinchcombe, A., Kadulina, Y., Lemieux, C., Aljied, R. and Gagnon, S. 2007. Driving is not a game: Video game experience is associated with risk-taking behaviours in the driving simulator. *Computers in Human Behaviour*. 69. 415–420.

Vaaranen , H. 2004. The Emotional Experience of Class: Interpreting Working-Class Kids' Street Racing in Helsinki. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 595 (1). 91–107.

Witkowski, E., Midgley, G., Stein, A., Miller, G. and Diamond, J. 2021. Racing with the industry: An interview on motorsports, esports, livestreaming and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sport in Society*. 26 (2). 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1997989.