Marking the Territory:
Grand Theft Auto IV as a Playground for Masculinity
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In his book, *A Primate’s Memoir*, Robert Sapolsky examines the quality of life of males in a pack of baboons on the Africa savannah. The common perception of such packs is that of a group of females dominated by an alpha male who has the luxury and pleasure of sex with whichever female he wants whenever he wants it. This interpretation of biological phenomenon has often been used to support ideas of male superiority and to explain male desires for multiple partners in humans.

Sapolsky found that the reality is quite different. The lives of males in such societal structures, even those of alpha males, are often much more complicated and difficult than thought. The structure of male hierarchy is fluid. There are always males looking to replace the alpha male. Thus males have to spend much of their lives fighting to defend whatever position they have achieved. Sapolsky’s research specifically measured stress levels in the males. He found that male baboons suffer from a great deal of stress, spend a lot of time fighting, and often die from stress and violence related injuries. Welcome to the world of *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

The *GTA* games are notorious for many reasons. They are considered so violent and depraved that some countries have gone so far as to ban their sale. It remains, however, one of the most successful game franchises of all time, having sold more than 70 million copies. The goal of this paper is to consider the specific kinds of pleasures afforded by *GTA* and specifically the latest game, *GTA IV*. If the game were just violent, it would simply be one of a large number of violent games. *GTA* is special because it provides male players with very specific and finely tuned opportunities to perform idealized masculinities. It gives players a chance to be the kind of male that is presented as the hero in myriad films, television shows and advertisements; a male they are very unlikely to actually be outside of the game.

Manhood, the nature of masculinity, and societal constructs of gender vs. biological determinism are the topics of heated debate in the 21st century. The nature of the discussion is reflected in the changing structure of academia itself as more Women’s
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Studies departments change their names to Gender Studies or are inclusive of Men’s Studies. Modern men are encouraged to be involved in parenting, show their emotions, have caring/nurturing relationships with women and men, and live lives very different from those available to males a generation ago. These kinds of men are the heroes of what are called “chick flicks”—or films whose primary audience is female. Stars like Hugh Grant specialize in playing, soft, emotionally conflicted and often vulnerable males. These men often seem to be trapped in a kind of Peter Pan universe where it is difficult for them to behave like adults. Seth Rogen’s films such as the 40 year-old Virgin, Knocked Up, and Pineapple Express also portray males in non-traditional ways. Rogen’s heroes are often not especially physically attractive or strong. They also engage in a lot of adolescent behaviors like dressing up, playing practical jokes and obsessing about the sex that they are not having.

These two genres of films both reflect and define new ways of being male in the 21st century. The chick flick genre defines what women supposedly would like men to be, while Rogen-type films purportedly show men as they really are. Researchers in Men’s Studies have documented the fact that the conceptions of what it means to be male in modern Western society are increasingly flexible. Culturally acceptable ways of being male are much broader and more accepting of ambiguity than they have been in the past. This new freedom does not come without cost. Some have argued that the shifts in gender identities make it difficult for men to understand how they should be male and what kind of a life will lead to feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction.

Although modern life provides men with many more flexible interpretations of masculinity than were available in the past, hegemonic models of the ideal male remain very strong. Popular culture continues to propagate images and stories of idealized males who embody traditional stereotypes of masculinity. Films, television shows and advertisements portray men who are: hard, aggressive, competitive, violent, willing to sacrifice themselves for honor, desirous of rescuing females, unemotional, detached, etc. GTA IV allows players to be this kind of idealized male for a period of time within a world with few ambiguities. The player plays as a man who has to earn the respect of other men through a series of violent acts. He has to acquire weapons and use them without compunction. He is loyal to his cousin and rescues him when needed. He
establishes relationships with women based on their need for his strength and
determination – one betrays him, the other is killed and her death must be avenged.

This paper details the pleasure to be found in enacting various tropes of
hegemonic masculinity without actually having to suffer the consequences in the real
world. GTA is an extremely popular game franchise. This paper argues that it has
achieved that status in part because of the vast disconnect between the way we say we
want our men to be and the way idealized masculinity is portrayed in our culture. GTA is
a way for male players to bridge that gap.

As Connell points out, what it means to be male is constantly changing both in
terms of what is appropriate and how it relates to economic class. Male roles shift in
response to shifts in the world around them:

The new information technology requires much sedentary keyboard work,
which was initially classified as women’s work (key-punch operators).
The marketing of personal computers, however, has redefined some of this
work as an arena of competition and power – masculine, technical, but not
working-class. These revised meanings are promoted in the text and
graphics of computer magazines, in manufacturers’ advertising that
emphasizes ‘power’ (Apple Computer named it’s laptop ‘the PowerBook’) and
in the booming industry of violent computer video games. Middle
class male bodies, separated by an old class division from physical force,
now find their powers spectacularly amplified in the man/machine systems
(the gendered language is entirely appropriate) of modern cybernetics\textsuperscript{9}.

This suggests that not only are computer mediated worlds like GTA enjoyable
playgrounds for modern males to explore, but the act of playing ‘hard’ masculinities on a
computer concomitantly reinforces the link between masculinity and technological
mastery. The ability to show competence in such worlds is important to establishing and
enforcing masculinity outside of the game as well.

2008 Movie Heroes

Men’s roles in the Western world have changed dramatically over the past three
decades. The U.S. and Europe have moved from cultures in which a large percentage of
men (and especially working class men) had jobs which involved hard physical labor to
jobs that consist of activities such as: working in offices, driving vehicles, operating
computer technology, managing people and things, and working in the service industry\textsuperscript{10}. 
There is little need for brute physical strength in such jobs and many of them were considered jobs for females before the shifts away from agriculture and manufacturing in Western economies.

Despite the fact that men’s lives and men’s roles have changed dramatically, cultural myths about the ideal heroic male remain largely unchanged. The ten top grossing English-language films of 2008 were: *The Dark Knight, Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, Kung Fu Panda, Hancock, Mamma Mia!, Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa, Iron Man, Quantum of Solace, WALL-E, and The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*. If we eliminate animated and children’s films and the sole ‘chick flick’, we are left with: *The Dark Knight, Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, Hancock, Iron Man, and Quantum of Solace*. These films are remarkably similar in the ways in which they represent idealized, heroic masculinity.

A man alone – In each story there is a man who operates largely by himself. He has friends and associates who help and support him, but he is generally shown as isolated from others for some reason. He is very often outside traditional authority structures like the police or the military and actively rebels against them.

Evil threatens – There are dark forces working against the man. He is aware of the dangers that they pose and is intelligent and sensitive enough to appreciate the danger. He is also brave and of good character. He is somehow selected to be the person who has to combat the forces of evil.

Strength and intelligence - He is clearly fit and strong – though not overwhelmingly so—but he is able to combine his physical strength with intelligence and excellent mastery of the technology available to him (often actual superpowers) in order to fight against apparently impossible odds.

A woman/women need him – There is a woman in the story who is a witness to his acts of heroism and who often needs to be rescued. It is often love for the woman or desire for the adoration/reciprocated love for the woman which motivates the man on his mission.

Technological mastery – All of the 007 movies involve the hero manipulating a range of technological gadgets with ease and dexterity. Technology is literally bent to 007’s will as anything he needs is customized for him. *Quantum of Solace* is no
exception. The film *Iron Man* takes this conceit even further\(^\text{12}\). The hero is not only the CEO of his company thus demonstrating that he can manage money too, but he is a computer programmer and able to literally make top level technology from the shards of metal he finds lying around in an Afghan cave.

**Hard work** – His is not a soft desk job (though in several of the super hero movies he actually does a desk job as a cover). He embodies the attributes of passion, action, competitiveness, justice, and especially the willingness to use violence to accomplish his goals. He is also required to physically suffer. He will be injured or terribly hurt, but persevere regardless.

The story line of *GTA IV* has many parallels to the story arc of these films\(^\text{13}\).

**A man alone** – Niko Bellic arrives as a poor immigrant in the United States. In Liberty City, his only contact is his brother Roman Bellic who had told him many lies about how successful he was in the promised land. Niko discovers that his brother is deeply in debt to men who are willing to kill to collect. Niko has no friends. He has gambled his life on his ability to make things work out in his new home. Embarking on the game is a way of forming an alliance with him; the player takes on Niko’s mission as his own.

**Evil threatens** – There are some really rotten characters in Liberty City. Rival gangs control different parts of the city and newcomers are not welcome. The Bad Guys have lots of weapons and Niko/the player has to be very clever and resourceful in order to combat them. In fact Niko is working for a group of the bad guys. However Niko is not like the others. He shows himself to be separate and unique due to his motivations and overarching desire for a better life.

**Strength and intelligence** – Niko moves through the world like a man who matters. He is not overwhelmingly muscular or hyper-masculine in appearance, but he moves with authority and weight. When next to other avatars it is obvious that he is tall and strong. His perpetual 5 O’clock shadow further accentuates his toughness. Although the avatar itself cannot be demonstrated to be any more intelligent than the player playing him, the fact that he is intelligent is demonstrated by the stupidity of his brother Roman. Niko’s dialogue is articulate, ironic and sometimes funny. He dryly assesses situations and remains calm even when other around him get agitated.
A woman/women need him — *GTA IV* is different from earlier games in that there are many fewer prostitutes on the streets, particularly during the day. This may be a response to external political pressure, the player’s ability to have sex with prostitutes and then kill them and take back the money they had been paid was endlessly cited as proof of the turpitude of earlier games in the *GTA* series, but it also gives *GTA IV* a different feeling. Although there were a few significant female characters in the story lines of previous games, a large number of the women who appeared in the game wore skimpy clothes and appeared to be sex workers. *GTA IV* is quite different in this respect. We meet Roman’s assistant Mallorie early in the story. She is working in the office and is wearing ordinary clothing. People flirt with her, but they don’t treat her like a prostitute. Niko is also introduced to her friend Michelle and they actually date each other. Sadly we later learn that Michelle is an undercover cop and that her interest in Niko is not because she really likes him. Later though Niko meets and comes to care about Kate. The need to avenge her murder is one of the motivations that moves the storyline through to the ending.

**Hard work** — Niko’s job is really very difficult. He routinely has to beat people to death with his bare hands or with an array of weapons. He must drive fast and ably, run up and down stairs, jump across rooftops and do a variety of other physically exhausting tasks. The fact of his physical strength is reinforced by the way he moves and showing him next to his pudgy ineffectual cousin Roman.

**Technological mastery** — Niko must develop and deploy mastery of a range of technologies to win the game. He has to be able to drive any of the vehicles necessary for missions: cars, motorcycles, helicopters, boats, etc. At various points in *GTA IV* he has to use and understand: cellphones, computers, email and chat softwares, and a vast array of weapons. As in several of the action films cited above, Niko uses the technology of authority against itself. In order to be able to play the game at all, players have to be able to understand and use the interfaces to the PlayStation 3 and Microsoft Xbox 360. The controls for these consoles have multiple buttons, sticks and bumpers which must be pressed, tilted and moved in a very complex series of movements in order to accomplish in-game tasks. Lack of mastery of the controls makes it very difficult for a non-expert player to even approach the *GTA* games.
Given that this is a video game which allows and encourages the player to break taboos\textsuperscript{16}, however, the hero engages in activities that go beyond what is allowed heroic males in more traditional media: “Niko goes so far over the edge sometimes that he’s not a charismatic anti-hero, he’s a homicidal terrorist”\textsuperscript{17}. This too though, could be considered as allowing the player to be a “real male” in that at certain points the player/avatar is overcome by blood lust and simply kills anything in sight.

The extraordinary appeal of the GTA series is due to the creators’ understanding of the power and appeal of myths of stereotypical heroic masculinity combined with technically beautifully executed games. The environment, avatars and gameplay combine to create an extremely immersive and engaging environment. The following sections outline specifically the ways in which players can act out these types of manhood within the confines of Liberty City—the freedom…or the constraints of battling to the death in the human equivalent of the baboons’ savannah.

Specific Means Through Which Masculinity is Defined and Expressed

Cars and Driving

Driving, and particularly driving aggressively, are closely associated with traditional views of masculinity\textsuperscript{18}. Young males have long proved their mettle to themselves and others by driving fast and furiously. A teen ritual documented in many popular movies is the challenge thrown to other males by revving engines and seeing who could drag Main or any other available straightaway the fastest. The practice is deadly and thus the topic of many driver safety courses. Driving accidents are the single most likely way for a young male to die in the U.S\textsuperscript{19}.

Mastery of driving and the ability to understand and manipulate car technology persists into the adult male definition of masculinity. During the last few election cycles, NASCAR males emerged as a specific demographic targeted by campaigns\textsuperscript{20}. Other researchers have drawn parallels between the NASCAR culture and the traditional, patriarchal, white male hegemonic masculinity of the American South\textsuperscript{21}.

As the title of the series clearly states, GTA is based on the player’s ability to interact with cars. The fundamental premise of the games is that the player can engage in
a variety of taboo/illegal/fun activities with cars. An enormous part of the pleasure of the game is the fact that it gives the player the opportunity to be bad and to enact specific dangerous behaviors associated with testosterone-addled young males. In all the GTA games, the player can approach any car, wrench open the door, throw the driver to the ground and drive away. Rarely, the driver will fight back, in which case it is necessary to use violence or weapons to kill or disable the driver in order to be able to drive away.

A GTA player can completely ignore the story and any of the missions and simply spend hours exploring the map from the perspective of different automobiles. There are cars driving all over the city and many of them are explicitly quoting from existing models. Each one has a different style of driving, different abilities to handle speed and accidents and, a different radio station playing based on the stereotype of the kind of person you would expect to find driving that kind of car. Cars can drive over curbs, smash through light poles, run over pedestrians, emerge victorious from police chases, and provide a perfect staging point for several different kinds of weapons. GTA provides an environment in which players can enact almost any of the aggressively masculine car-related behaviors that are prohibited either by law or by public opinion in modern society, but remain tantalizingly appealing due to their continued glorification in popular films and television shows.

Prey, Predation and Intelligence

One of the binary divisions in traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity is activity/passivity. Males are to act forcefully to seek out females and accomplish external goals while females passively await male attention and focus most of their activity on improving their status as sexually appealing objects. Games such as GTA IV provide many opportunities for males to be forceful and active, though very few of the activities enabled by the game are in any way constructive. One of the most interesting activities supplied by this and many other male-oriented games is predation. The thrill of the hunt and the exquisite anxiety provoked by the threat of death maintain player interest and emotional investment throughout the game.

In his fascinating book, The Better to Eat You With, Berger discusses the role of predation in evolutionary intelligence. He compares behaviors in populations of prey
animals in situations where predators (wolves) were eliminated by humans, and then what occurred subsequently when predators were reintroduced. He found that moose that grew up without predation did not know that they ought to be afraid of wolves. They were easily and quickly killed by the reintroduced predators, suggesting that fear of wolves is a learned behavior, not one that is encoded.

Berger notes that the behavior of prey populations was significantly different if they experienced predation vs. populations that did not. Populations that were preayed upon had to become smarter. Animals that failed to learn about the dangers of predators were quickly killed. The surviving animals were those who were aware of the threats and developed strategies to detect and counter such threats. They were the animals who managed to reproduce and who subsequently taught their young to fear predators. Thus the presence of predators acts as a selective force on prey populations, ensuring that the ones who survive are the ones who can learn, and pass that knowledge on.

Wolves, predation and the relationship between wolves and humans are topics considered in Jiang’s fictionalized version of the time he spent on the plains of Mongolia. The nomadic tribes that live and raise sheep on the plains have a very complicated relationship with wolves. They and their flocks are preayed upon by wolves and the nomads hunt wolves under certain circumstances. Jiang describes the effect of this relationship on the culture and specifically on the intelligence of the nomadic people and their dogs. The predator/prey relationships create an ongoing competition which results in more intelligence among both groups. Each side is constantly seeking better and more strategic ways of beating the other. Each side is constantly learning from the other. Jiang argues that this relationship is so strong and important in the lives of these people that the wolves are seen as a kind of deity. They are seen as having mythical powers that are both dangerous and beneficial for the humans who interact with them.

Modern life provides very few opportunities for predator/prey experiences for humans. In many parts of the U.S., hunting remains a popular sport, and one that is closely associated with hegemonic masculinity. However entertaining it may be to hunt as predators, few modern males routinely experience being prey. One opportunity is presented by the increasingly popular sport of paintball which was played by over 5 million Americans in 2008. Paintball is a simulation of a warzone which means that all
players are simultaneously both predator and prey. It is a very emotionally intense and engaging game. Paintball is extremely physically demanding and requires specialized equipment and environments. GTA IV is much more accessible.

Like many other shooting games, the bulk of the missions in GTA IV involve hunting people and down and killing them. In the process of doing so, Niko angers other actors in the game who are very focused on killing him as well. The experience of hunting and being hunted is what raises the level of tension in the game and what maintains it over the long period of time required to complete the game. The player experiences the feeling of becoming smarter as he survives predation and as he preys upon others.

GTA IV heightens the experience of being hunted. For example when Niko is wanted by the police, a red circle surrounds him and the player has to figure out how to get Niko away from the oncoming predators within a given period of time. The tension is augmented by the red color of the screen and the wailing of approaching sirens. Niko often has to race away through twisty streets making lots of fast turns in order to get the cops off his tail. If he fails to do so, he can either be shot while resisting arrest, or wind up either in the hospital or back in front of the local precinct minus money and health. Then he has to restart whichever mission he was on from scratch.

The game utilizes the predator/prey environment as a way of making the player feel intelligent as he outsmarts aggressors and as a means of actually making the player more intelligent through gameplay. The player is punished for wrong moves by succumbing to abler predators. Unlike succumbing to wolves on the Mongolian plains, when Niko is killed by a predator, he just respawns. The game provides the pleasure of the positive experience without the pain of the negatives. Successfully beating the game involves determining how the police and other predatory males in the game are going to act and figuring out how to accomplish the mission by either avoiding or killing them. Surviving predation gives the player a terrific feeling of accomplishment and increases health, money and other in-game rewards.
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_GTA IV_ specifically reinforces traditional concepts of patriarchal masculine pride. Pride is an essential component of traditional masculinity and also important for establishing social capital and the ability to lead\(^30\). Niko doesn’t have many material assets in the game, though he accumulates them over time. What he does have is his pride. Pride is expressed through gameplay as a motivational mechanism to encourage Niko to do what he is supposed to do\(^31\), and as a way of justifying the violence that he carries out. It is a delicate balance because in order for the storyline to make sense, Niko has to obey the orders that come down from above. Thus he is technically a servant of more powerful men. However the game utilizes the honor/pride structure familiar from Mafia-type organizations and cultures in which blood feuds are the norm to justify Niko’s behavior.

Any slight, or any expression of disrespect from one man to another in the game must be paid for with blood. Niko is routinely charged with killing someone in the game because that person has offended someone above him. Traditional patriarchal values regarding women are used to motivate Niko on several occasions. At one point, Vlad takes an interest in Roman’s assistant Mallorie (Uncle Vlad mission). Niko is sent to talk to Vlad about leaving Mallorie alone. Of course this doesn’t work and Niko must follow Vlad to the docks and kill him. Mallorie is not consulted.

In another mission, Mikhail decides that he doesn’t like his daughter’s biker boyfriend. Niko gets the contract to eliminate this problem (No Love Lost mission). He follows the boyfriend to a park where he is attacked by a group of bikers. Niko must kill them all to complete the mission. Not only is Niko enforcing paternal control over the daughter’s love interest, but he is doing so while defeating traditionally hyper-masculine males—biker guys. When Dwayne’s girlfriend leaves him for another man, Dwayne hires Niko to kill the guy and Cherise. Later it is determined that Mikhail should not have ordered the killing of the biker boyfriend because he had high-level connections. Thus Niko has to go and kill Mikhail too. It’s just how hierarchy is established and maintained...

Marking the Territory
GTA IV and many other games such as Halo and Counterstrike require expert knowledge of the territory in order to succeed in the game. A player’s knowledge of the map/s and understanding of the location of people and objects within it is essential to being able to win the game. Sophisticated understanding of the territory allows players to play the game more quickly and easily. For example, a player can go into the map and set waypoints for locations he would like to get to quickly and then steal a cab and get there within seconds using the in-cab navigation system.

In GTA IV the player has to understand how to use the in-game map. Symbols on the radar indicate where to go and the locations of important people. Failure to understand this means that the player will simply wander aimlessly. GTA IV uses the cellphone as the interface to many of the important people and activities in the story. The player has to be able to make connections between what Niko is told to do over the phone and the colors and symbols that appear on the map icon in the corner of the screen.

Interestingly, several studies posit that there are significant differences between brains in terms of how differently sexed brains orient themselves in environments. Many couples have experienced this themselves while driving in cars and having arguments about the best way to get to the desired destination. When the author of this study started playing GTA IV, she found it impossible to orient herself in the game without having the paper map that ships with the game spread out beside her so that she could figure out where Niko was going in the game. The use of this object was a source of hilarity to the young males she enrolled as expert assistants. Two of them said that they had never even seen the map because they always buy the games used, the third just shook his head in disbelief. They all disdained using the paper map and relied exclusively on in-game technology and personal experience for navigation within the game.

This brought to the author’s mind the difference in experience when taking a male vs. a female dog for a walk. An un-neutered male dog cannot walk far without peeing and marking the territory. He is also intensely interested in smelling the markings of other dogs. He frequently must be dragged away from this task to continue the walk. Female and neutered male dogs appear to pay little attention to these signals. Failure to pay attention to territorial markings in GTA IV means certain death.
The game codifies marked territory through the use of Safe Houses. Niko has to have a place to go to rest and/or hide in between missions. Given that the map is so large, he has to acquire Safe Houses in various locations across Liberty City so that he can reach them during critical moments. He acquires Safe Houses in the process of completing missions. Niko is concretely rewarded for having made the hit or obtained the assets required by the mission in the form of real estate that is marked as his.

Relationships

One feature of new forms of masculinity is an emphasis on the importance of relationships – meaningful human connections between males and females and males and other males. We can see this in several of Apatow’s films. If we consider them as descriptors of the current state of manhood, relationships between males are very important to these stories. The 40-Year-Old Virgin, for example, features a man who has failed to have sex with a female. His friends get together to help him resolve this difficulty. The film demonstrates many different forms of relationships between males—generally in a positive and humorous light—while at the same time chronicling the difficulties of relationships with women. The film ends happily with the virgin finding, bedding and marrying his own true love.

Needless to say, GTA IV ensures that none of this ridiculous relationship business hinders Niko’s progress through Liberty City. Niko solves the problem of relationships by not having any of emotional significance. If he wants sex, he can pick up a prostitute or go to a strip club and buy it. He does develop a kind of relationship with Michelle in that he drives her places and they go on a couple “dates,” however no real communication is involved. If Niko neglects to contact them for a long period, he can receive angry texts demanding attention. The only thing Niko has to do to prepare for these dates is to go out and purchase new clothing before picking her up. Interestingly, Niko also needs to be wearing a suit for the final missions in the game. This suggests that being well dressed is only partially about appealing to women, but also has a role in establishing status and appearing powerful to other men.

On one level though, the game appears to take relationships seriously in that it codifies them and uses them to control some in-game events. Many relationships with
other significant characters in the game go up and down based on the choices that Niko makes. If Niko keeps his “Like” and “Respect” scores high enough in his relationship with Roman, for example, he can call Roman at any time during the game and Roman will send him a cab to take him where he wants to go free of charge. Relationships are thus reduced to a kind of currency that can be spent as needed in the game.

Relationships with women have very little depth. Niko has little compunction about using force if he deems it appropriate. When his job is to kidnap Gracie and she starts grabbing at the steering wheel, Niko slaps her (*I’ll Take Her* mission). As in the earlier games, the avatar’s ability to torture, humiliate and kill prostitutes is extremely disturbing. This too is directly related to traditional patriarchal views of women’s role in society. Many cultures denigrate women who are viewed as promiscuous or who are sex workers and violence against them is often permitted or encouraged. Late in the game, Niko meets and comes to care about Kate. Once again very little occurs to actually establish a relationship with her. She does serve as a motivator in the plotline, however. In one of the two endings, when she is shot to death at Roman’s wedding, avenging her death increases the satisfaction of killing Pegorino. In the other ending, she leaves Niko – another betrayal, damn women! However, none of these relationships really matter to the gameplay or the player’s experience of emotion in the game.

Relationships with men are even simpler. Niko has to help Roman because they are linked by blood, and that is all that matters in patriarchy. When it comes time to execute Vlad, Niko says: “You were the stupid one Vladdy boy. Nobody fucks with my family.” Niko is constantly having to save Roman from dire situations in which he is being beaten or about to be killed by rivals. Roman’s feminine/passive dependence on Niko is emphasized by the way he is repeatedly referred to as “your fat cousin.”

Niko accepts and executes the orders that come down from the bosses because in a pack of males, those below the top dogs obey them until it is time to kill them and occupy their position. When Niko is sent to “persuade” other men to do as they are told, this persuasion occurs in the form of beatings and physical threats. After the male has been subjugated to an adequate degree, he agrees to do Niko’s bidding or is killed. Sometimes (as in the case of the *Weekend at Florian’s* job) it is necessary to do both. If
Niko doesn’t kill him after he gets the information, the victim calls for help and makes life more difficult later.

Niko is always rewarded for completing his missions with cash and sometimes other benefits. The results of his success always benefit him alone. Sometimes men in the game will complain that Niko is working for someone else—usually an enemy of that particular mission contractor, but it is understood that this is a business and Niko does what he has to do for money. In this regard, GTA IV is unlike many other popular video games such as Counterstrike and Halo, which emphasize cooperation among groups of males. Cooperation is very often a smarter strategy than selfishness: “…if people can arrive at a cooperative solution, any nonconstant sum game can, in principle, be converted to a win-win game.” GTA IV is not about optimizing group experience or building relationships. It specializes in delivering the experience of the selfish, violent, aggressive, testosterone-driven male in unadulterated form.

Violence/Self-sacrifice

As Messner, et. al. explored at length in their work on the “Televised Sports Manhood Formula” there are very specific means through which manhood is defined in relationship to violence. Public manhood can be described as a kind of performance:

What is a Real Man? A Real Man is strong, tough, aggressive, and above all, a winner in what is still a Man’s World. To be a winner he has to do what needs to be done. He must be willing to compromise his own long-term health by showing guts in the face of danger, by fighting other men when necessary, and by “playing hurt” when he is injured.

Many other researchers have looked at this topic as well. All the GTA games focus on permitting players to be extremely violent. Niko can roam the city and start fights with any passer by. He can drive into anything. He can crash cars with abandon just because he wants to. As a player acquires weapons and money through playing the game, the amount of mayhem the player can achieve increases. The ability to deploy grenades, rocket launchers and helicopters allow players to make some very big bangs.

Traditional masculinity very often requires tests during which males must endure physical pain and inflict it on others. The ability to be a male is related specifically to the willing submission to violence and a corollary willingness to be violent to others. This
concept is delineated in the film *Fight Club*. In this film, modern males must seek out other men with whom they can be ‘real men’ in stark contrast to the overwhelming feminization of world in which they actually live. The depiction of violent manhood in this film specifies that:

1) it is a place separate from women
2) a man is required to be violent immediately upon joining the group
3) a man is required to submit to violence immediately to establish worth
4) participants experience the pleasure of watching violence occur around them.

*GTA IV* establishes from the beginning that it is a world for men, a world where brothers take care of brothers. Women are largely irrelevant except as motivation for a job (protecting family honor, kidnapping), revenge (avenging deaths of), or for apparently meaningless social encounters (bowling with Michelle). Earlier games in the series were populated by lots of prostitutes which further marginalized females as objects to be used for a specific purpose.

The game does not technically require violence if the player’s only desire is to be an observer. A player can enter the game and just drive around and see the sights of Liberty City. Arguably, however, such a player is not playing the game because 90% of the game content is not available to a person who plays like this. In order to meet the cast of characters, experience the story and have access to many parts of the map, the player must play and playing is being violent. Niko’s job is to go out and kill people and destroy things.

In the process of doing so, Niko is harmed and killed repeatedly. One of the advantages of playing video games though (unlike football and hockey where the pain is real), is that the avatar immediately respawns, none the worse for wear. Niko has a health meter which must be watched to ensure that he has enough health to complete his missions. If he dies, either from violence or accident, he merely reappears at the hospital where he can set off to attempt the missions again. The avatar body can be repeatedly sacrificed – as the myth of manhood requires—without cost to the actual body of the player.
Racial Exploration/Exploitation

The *GTA* series are also notorious for racial stereotyping. A group representing Haitians sought to ban *GTA: Vice City* for its representation of Haitians\(^{47}\). Many of the storylines in earlier games in the series involved rival ethnic groups competing against one another for drugs, prostitution, gambling and other sorts of crimes. *GTA IV* is no exception. Roman and Niko have to deal with American black gang members, Italian Mafiosi, Russian Mafia and assorted others. (The latest game, released in spring 2009, is based in Chinatown.) From the beginning of the series, part of the pleasure of *GTA* has been the player’s ability to be powerful/violent/murderous towards ethnic groups that are considered dangerous to middle-class white male normalcy.

Nakamura coined the term “identity tourism” to define the practice of players adopting another racial identity within a game and then enacting the stereotypes of that ethnicity\(^{48}\). *GTA San Andreas* was the first game in which the player played as an avatar of another race. *GTA IV*, however, returns to the more comfortable playground of allowing the player to dominate other ‘dangerous’ ethnicities.

Few players of *GTA IV* would feel comfortable actually walking the streets of the dangerous urban ghettos controlled by any of the ethnic groups routinely represented in the *GTA* games, but inside the game, the player is empowered in these environments. If Niko has the right weapons and enough health, he can blow away anyone. One example of this is the voice of a black drug dealer alternately pleading and taunting as Niko hunts him down and kills him and his friends.

“Don’t get so close to a brother…yo! Get off a brother’s back!...I’m just trying to put food in my babies mouth…Motherfuck…You’re going to get the hell beat outa you boy…You’re going to get punished son…The pain train’s gonna get you bitch..You best not be coming in here...Stay away from here…he’s comin in…You don’t got us…ahhhhhgg.”

The caption describing this mission in the *YouTube* published clip reads: “This one shows a mission where you follow a drug dealer to his crib, and then pop a cap in him and his homies”\(^{49}\).

The ability to kill enemies seen as very dangerous goes a long way towards establishing rank and status in male power hierarchies\(^{50}\). This game allows players to
perform this activity over and over again under a variety of different circumstances and varying degrees of difficulty. The hit often has to be outsmarted or outmaneuvered not simply overpowered with force, thus allowing the player to feel smarter as well as more powerful.

Cops

The role of the police in civil, democratic societies is to enforce the law and to capture those who don’t. GTA provides players with the opportunity to defy authority and specifically to defy and sometimes humiliate the police. A “real man” doesn’t take orders from cops. This concept of masculinity that rebels against societal rules and strictures is codified in many popular films and repeated in the films cited earlier in this paper. In Iron Man, the hero has links to the military and other formal societal structures, but he operates outside of them and frequently defies orders from official sources. The Indiana Jones and 007 films are similar. Bond is working for an organization but very often breaks the rules and defies authority. Indiana Jones frequently scoffs at authority and finds his own way around hurdles.

In GTA IV the act of specifically defying the authority of the police is a central construct of the game. After committing a crime, the red ring covers the icon in the lower left hand corner of the screen and the voice of the police can be heard ordering Niko to stop. To complete the mission, Niko needs to evade the police. This is accomplished by driving away as quickly as possible in explicit defiance of the yelling voice. Escape often involves crashing cars, running over innocent bystanders, and shooting/killing as many policemen as possible.

Some missions specifically require the theft of a police car. Niko occupies the technology of authority and uses it against itself. In the Portrait of a Killer mission, Niko has to access the computer in a police car in order to get information about the man he is supposed to kill. This occurs with even more sophistication in the Smackdown mission. Here Niko uses the police car computer to find and track the victim, and positions the police car to help him. Then when he is running away from the crime scene, he can call 911 so that the police are keeping his pursuers busy while he runs away.

The player can also get a sniper rifle and locate Niko on top of a skyscraper with a
high wanted rating, then he can attract police helicopters to the skyscraper by shooting at them. Using the rifle, Niko can pick off the police officers one at a time or shoot the pilot and watch the helicopter fall and crash on the streets below while officers yell "Where do you think you are going to go? Put your hands behind your head!" 52

Young males are often the targets of police attention. Rowdy males can get in trouble for underage drinking, driving in an unsafe manner, behaving badly at sporting events, college pranks and a range of other activities. GTA IV provides players with a sort of payback experience. Everything that the player does in the game provokes the wrath of the police, but the able player is able to thwart them at every turn. Successfully playing the game is an act of defiance against established authority.

Keeping Score

Traditional masculinity is often codified and expressed through ritualized and publicly displayed hierarchies. This is evidenced in the use of badges, patches, types of uniforms and other ranking markers in the military, police, fraternities and some forms of organized sports. A participant in these organizations knows very specifically what his rank is compared to others. This creates stability within the organization, but it also creates an orderly system through which those lower in the hierarchy can aspire to move up through it by achieving whatever is necessary to gain a higher position.

Another function of this display is bragging rights. A person who has obtained a particular status is able to display it and accrue the pleasure of implicitly and explicitly gloating about his achievements. The philosopher Johann Huizinga who wrote the seminal work on human play, Homo Ludens, explains the importance of boasting. “This boasting of ones own virtue as a form of contest slips over quite naturally into contumely of one’s adversary, and this in its turn becomes a contest in its own right. It is remarkable how large a place these bragging and scoffing matches occupy in the most diverse civilizations”53. He also posits that “the real motives [for war] are to be found less in the ‘necessities’ of economic expansion, etc., than in the pride and vainglory, the desire for prestige and all the pomps of superiority”54.

Games that are produced for a primarily male audience exploit this desire for public vainglory in several ways. Within the game, GTA IV creates a clear and visible
tracking system by which achievements can be recorded and recognized. The main game has a series of missions that must be carried out, but there are side missions as well with separate lists of achievements and rewards. Online game play and the ability to record and display individual game scores online have given players a much broader public. The X-Box and PlayStation 3 have made marketing choices that very ably exploit players’ desires to both show the scores they have obtained to the widest possible audience and to scoff at the score of others in online forums.

On foot, by plane, sea, or car GTA IV is a blast to simple [sic] engage in an all out war for bragging rights and online cash that can be spent on your customizable character. Online isn’t as smooth as it could be as it has a lot of glitches, however its way more than I expected and its 100% pure fun. Hardcore online gamers might not be satisfied, but most will be more than overjoyed to finally be able to lock and load with some friends online.

Irony/Social Commentary

One of the most important aspects of GTA, and possibly the thing that most distinguishes the franchise from other video games, is the irony that permeates the game. At the same time that the game allows the player to indulge in the most extreme and implausibly testosterone-fueled activities, the game itself is mocking such behaviors. In-game television programs and advertisements, radio stations and billboards provide a running satirical commentary on the state of civilization in general, and on the roles of males in particular.

Also, if you generally listen to the radio stations: We Know The Truth, Public Liberty Radio, and The Journey, it's very obvious that by mocking radio talk show hosts like Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity, they are making a commentary about how males have come to idolize this hyper-masculine model of what a man should be: one host talks about the Mythic female orgasm and how it doesn't exist. He goes on to talk about how his wife took up Tennis lessons because he doesn't satisfy her, and she works out with her trainer two or three times a day. They CLEARLY are mocking the masculinity archetype of being so masculine that they don't even believe females can have orgasms because they've never tried.

This biting satire is very funny and makes the player feel intelligent and savvy in the same way The Daily Show and the Colbert Report reward the viewer who can understand these shows’ analyses of world events. The player plays at hyper-masculinity while the environment itself is mocking it.
Conclusion

Given the massive shifts in the gender cultural landscape, it is to be expected that there is some confusion about what kinds of behavior are to be expected, desired and rewarded in males. On May 2, 2009, National Public Radio’s *Prairie Home Companion* show broadcast Brad Paisley singing the song, “I’m Still a Guy”:

When you see a deer you see Bambi and I see antlers up on the wall. When you see a lake you think picnics and I see a large mouth up under that log. You're probably thinkin' that you're gonna change me. In some ways well maybe you might. Scrub me down, dress me up, oh but no matter what remember I'm still a guy.

When you see a priceless French painting and I see a drunk naked girl. You think that riding a wild bull sounds crazy and I'd like to give it a whirl. Well love makes a man do some things he ain't proud of and in weak moment I might walk your sissy dog, hold your purse at the mall but remember I'm still a guy.

I'll pour out my heart, hold your hand in the car, write a love song that makes you cry. Then turn right around knock some jerk to the ground 'cause he copped a feel as you walk by.

I can hear you now talkin' to your friends sayin', "Yeah girls he's come a long way from draggin' his knuckles and carryin' a club and buildin' a fire in a cave." But when you say a back rub means only a back rub then you swat my hand when I try. Well now what can I say at the end of the day, "Honey, I'm still a guy."

And I'll pour out my heart, hold your hand in the car, write a love song that makes you cry. Then turn right around knock some jerk to the ground 'cause he copped a feel as you walk by.

These days there's dudes gettin' facials, manicured, waxed and botoxed. With deep spray-on tans and creamy lotiony hands you can't grip a tackle box.

Yeah, with all of these men linein' up to get neutered it's hip now to be feminized. I don't highlight my hair, I've still got a pair. Yeah, honey I'm still a guy.

Oh my eyebrows ain't plucked there's a gun in my truck. Oh thank god, I'm still a guy.
Before performing the song, the artist apologized for singing a “non politically correct” song on National Public Radio\textsuperscript{59}. He was acknowledging that his audience was not a particularly conservative or traditional group. When he was finished, the crowd roared with pleasure. Such a response suggests that the players of \textit{Grand Theft Auto IV} are not the only ones who are nostalgic for the days in which masculinity was clearer, simpler and directly related to traditional patriarchal values. \textit{GTA IV} allows players to feel, like Paisley, that they still “have a pair” of balls, that testicles still mean power, and that it is a kind of power to be proud of.\textsuperscript{60}

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58 This is perfectly exemplified by the ad for Powerthirst that can be found on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRuNxHqwazs). A similar ad airs on TV in GTA IV.


60 Many thanks to Chris Bates, Michael Green and Spencer Striker (expert GTA players) for their feedback and commentary on this paper.