Grand Theft Heutagogy: A reflection on the utilization of video games as a teaching tool in the lecture theatre

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Abstract

This paper explores the utilization of the video game Grand Theft Auto as a unique tool within the lecture theatre to develop contemporary heutagogy. Drawing upon the authors' personal reflections in the form of an autoethnographic account across a four-year period, the challenges and benefits of utilizing the approach within in-person and virtual learning environments is interrogated. Utilizing video games as a means to ensure students are active participants whilst learning complex theoretical paradigms has proven highly beneficial, aiding in the reduction of attainment gaps and wider barriers to learning. So too, the approach has enabled cohorts to disentangle criminological problems whilst being empowered to question the nature of public criminology within contemporary discourse. Active engagement with video games whilst in the lecture theatre, by both students and lecturers, has enabled a dynamic and inclusive learning environment.

Key Words:

Heutagogy, Video Games, Criminology, Reflexivity; Autoethnography

Introduction

The past few years have seen a surge in the use and application of video games within both the classroom and lecture halls. Garcia, Ferguson and Wang (2022) have argued that, due to the interactive nature of video games, it is at the fore of many research projects designed to see both the influence and impact of the medium as an interactive learning tool. For instance, a number of academic studies have been conducted including reading skills (Murphy et al., 2002), violence and aggression (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019; Hilgard, et al. 2019), prosocial behaviour (Garcia, Ferguson and Wang, 2022), cognitive functions (Sanchez, 2012) and environmental and space design (Okur and Aygenc, 2017). As noted by Ashinoff (2014), video games are designed to, in essence, be learning machines (see also Gee, 2003; 2005). Developing this idea further, Ashinoff (2014) states that 'another way in which video games are learning machines is that they are highly motivating and therefore they can induce higher student engagement compared to traditional teaching methods' (pg. 2). While there have been studies into the pedagogical significance of video games for children, there have also been studies that explore the applicability within higher education environments. For example, Stansbury and Munro (2013; see also Stansbury et al., 2014) conducted a study for an undergraduate-level behavioural statistics lecture by 'having students play the game Dance Dance Revolution to generate scores that would be used as dependent variables while teaching the students about factorial research designs' (cited in Ashinoff, 2014: 2). In conducting such experiments, the authors determined that the inclusion of videogames increased student engagement and retained content-based knowledge.

This article seeks to expand the use of videogames as an important teaching tool to the discipline of criminology by presenting a reflexive autoethnographic account of the use of

Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar, 2013) in the lecture space. We will first provide an overview of some of criminology's current limitations as a discipline that has subsequently shaped the university student experience. We will also chart some of the implications of current iterations of public criminology, and how said examples in fact perpetuate certain viewpoints and underpin student motivations and experiences. This will be followed by an overview of how the newly emerging deviant leisure perspective has informed our approach to content and delivery to students, providing the necessary theoretical tools in which to challenge the aforementioned orthodoxies pertaining to criminology, subsequent degree content and thus delivery. Attention will then shift to the importance of heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012) as an important pedagogical tool in which to practically equip students with the means to transcend the proverbial cage of mainstream accounts of criminology. Attention will then shift towards some of the "teething pains" related to the implementation of video games within the lecture space, with considerations related to remote learning, designing the teaching session, charting key evolutions and developments, and some anecdotes and insights gleaned via the teaching team's autoethnographic accounts. This will be achieved via a reflexive account of the use of video games, and in particular grand theft auto V, as an integral component in the students' learning experience.

Cutting Edge Theory Informing the Curriculum

As we sit down to write this article, our university of employment (Birmingham City University) and the wider higher education sector, are actively working towards offering prospective students far more than just discipline-based knowledge. In an increasingly competitive consumer market, for example, Birmingham City University's corporate

responsibility pledges to 'educat[e] our students to be socially, economically and environmentally responsible citizens' (Birmingham City University, N.D). As criminologists, we continually consider and reflect on how to enhance student's understandings and awareness beyond abstract concepts and theories and educate them to be more socially responsible citizens. Whilst this may seem obvious at face value given the well-known facets of criminology degrees (theories and models of punishment, gender and crime, race and crime, theories of crime, criminalisation processes etc.), we believed that we could do more in ensuring that students finish their undergraduate degree with a greater understanding of their own role as socially and morally responsible citizens. The crux of this position can be found in the work of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2008), who suggests that the nature of violence is routinely misunderstood at an ontological level:

> *We should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and promote tolerance* (Žižek, 2008: 1).

If we adapt a Žižekian perspective, we can begin to see how much of what criminology is built upon, including all the various agencies and stakeholders associated with it, is this subjective violence outlined in the above quote. Within the domains of public criminology, such fascination with subjective violence is evident, with criminologists often being included in true crime television shows. For instance, there are channels dedicated to the true crime

genre including Crime and Investigation (formerly Sky Crime), which launched in 2019. A spokesman for Sky said the channel will include:

> *…emotionally charged accounts of true crimes, many of which remain unsolved, including I Love You, Now Die and The Disappearance of Susan Cox Powell…[It] will show documentaries covering famous headline cases from the US and UK, such as Kemper on Kemper and Britain's Most Evil Killers. As well as the In Defence of series, which will bring new insight into some of the most notorious killers of modern times* (O'Neill, 2019).

Within such programmes, it is common for criminologists to appear on the small screen and give educated perspectives on the realities on murder and, in particular, serial murder. Despite this specialist attention towards the phenomenon of serial murder from both true crime producers and academics, viewers will be hard pressed to find a qualified academic who moves beyond such sensationalised forms of crime to elucidate the lived reality of crime (e.g. fraud and burglaries) and violence beyond its physical manifestations. Viewers will be unlikely to struggle, however, to find a show where a criminologist gives their professional perspective on a case study of serial murder or another extreme form of homicide. This fundamentally disavows the fact that such crimes are, in reality, uncommon. This engagement with public criminology has resulted in an observable impact in the classroom and lecture hall. For instance, as academics we often ask students in lectures to provide an example of what exactly constitutes violence and on almost all occasion's responses include such criminal acts as: serial murder, mass shootings, hitmen, gang and organised criminality and occasionally domestic and confrontational homicide. It is important to note here that, when it comes to such discussions related to violence, almost without exception extreme acts

of recognised criminality such as serial killers are at the front and centre of student's awareness and, for some, one of the reasons why they enrolled on a criminology degree. Such forms of public criminology are indeed far removed from the reality of what criminology does and what it consists of. For instance, homicide is a rare form of crime, with the most recent Office for National Statistics (2022) recording 594 homicide victims in the year ending March 2021. Serial murder, a recurring theme in which criminologists engage with in mainstream media, is even rather still with less than 40 confirmed cases in the UK since the time of Jack the Ripper (Lynes, 2017). Such prevailing narratives within public criminology discourse is akin to wading ankle deep into a vast and deep ocean and falsey deducing that there is nothing left to be explored or discovered.

In essence, if criminology (and by extension university degrees) do not begin to "step back" and consider not only violence that disrupts normality but also violence embedded within such normality, then our ability to create such citizens is compromised. With this in mind, the authors sought to challenge such perspectives that have a tendency to see criminality and violence through myopic lenses, which also consequently locates blame to a very small subset of the population. Through this normative position, students are rarely asked to be reflexive and, more importantly, begin to question how their own behaviour may be underpinning some of the most serious harms characterised by the impact of late capitalism (Fisher, 2009). Within such an endeavour, the authors turned to contemporary and critical perspectives in order to challenge these prevailing orthodoxies and enhance each student's capability to leave university as morally and socially responsible citizens.

The concept of deviant leisure may conjure particular images of well-known and traditional acts of deviance (for example, certain forms of clothing linked to subcultures;

certain forms of tattoos; loitering). However, this more 'traditional' definition of deviancy is rather narrow in scope and omits a range of potential harmful behaviours and activities (Atkinson, 2014). As noted by Atkinson (ibid), the limitations of conventional criminological approaches to understanding the actualities of crime and deviance are displayed when Stan Cohen posed three simple questions:

> *The stuff of criminology consists of only three questions: Why are laws made? Why are they broken? What do we do or what* should we do about this?
>
> (Cohen, 1998: 9).

In posing these relatively straightforward questions, Cohen was highlighting the shortcomings of criminology as a discipline. Specifically, he highlights that such questions are (usually) posed by those with authority within criminal justice and crime control agencies. So too, there is an inherent short-sightedness with regard to the realities and complexities that create and perpetuate the conditions that often result in criminal behaviour. In order for us to break free of these restrained and misguided questions, we need to move beyond such orthodox notions and draw upon more critical and contemporary perspectives. Deviant leisure, as proposed by Oliver Smith and Tom Raymen, attempted to provide such solutions by drawing upon contemporary paradigms including ultra-realism and more modern critical strains of cultural criminology. In defining this new perspective, Smith (2016) – aware of the inherent restraints of criminology – posits that:

'deviant leisure' began to orient itself toward a reconceptualisation of social deviance and an exploration of how individual, social, economic, and environmental harms are structurally and culturally embedded within many accepted and normalized forms of leisure, asserting that criminologists need to travel beyond the boundaries associated with more traditional socio-legal constructions of crime and into the realm of harm and zemiology (Smith, 2016: 6).

Taking this quote into consideration, along with the previously discussed orthodox notions of deviance, a deviant leisure perspective seeks to articulate a more nuanced interpretation. One which is better suited to contemporary application and designed to 'capture' and deduce a wider range of harms that criminology is otherwise incapable of determining. Along with drawing upon more critical strands of criminology better suited for the realities of 21st century life, deviant leisure also puts zemiology to the fore. Zemiology, similar to the rationale behind deviant leisure, was inspired by the notion that much of criminology and relevant research is conducted, produced and maintained by 'very powerful interests, not least the state, which produces definitions of crime through criminal law' (Hillyard & Tombs, 2017: 284). Again, such a perspective is crucial in transcending the preverbal cage in which many within academia and wider society unwittingly find themselves within, unable or inhibited from perceiving notions of harm outside of the traditional notion which is constrained by legal frameworks.

To summarise this brief introduction to deviant leisure, such a perspective seeks to uncover those behaviours that within a more ethical social order would be seen as the harmful acts that they actually are. More specifically, as a growing assortment of forms of 'deviant

leisure' become culturally entrenched within the conventional and their associated harms become regularised, 'deviant leisure scholars argue that the usual focus of criminology on legally defined crime and forms of deviance which controvert social norms and values requires some conceptual expansion (Smith, 2016: 10).

When we begin to critically look inwards at the harms embedded in some of the most normalised and even celebrated forms of commodities and leisure, it is evident that the video game industry is an important and, ideally, useful entry point with regard to teaching delivery. Specifically, a October 2020 to January 2021 survey of UK adults aged 16 years and older found that 92 percent of respondents aged between 16 and 24 years had played video games (Clement, 2021). So too, video games have become a multi-billion-pound industry, now generating more income than any Hollywood blockbuster (Malim, 2018; Mitic, 2019). Since the early 1990s, the sale of video games has risen dramatically, and thus, as Jones (2008: 1) states 'games are arguably the most influential form of popular expression and entertainment in today's broader culture'. As Hayward (2012) denotes, virtual spaces have an increasing presence within our lived reality. Thus criminology needs to give attention to video games in order for us to fully conceptualise the world we now exist within and the inherent symbolic violence (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008). It is from this position, the approach to heutagogy explored within this paper was developed for the final year module Dark Leisure.

Public Criminology in the Lecture Theatre

The pluralistic term that is public criminology denotes a wide range of perspectives on how to connect criminological scholarship to the public. Within the context of this article the authors recognize the importance of Unger and Inderbitzen's (2010) position that criminology struggles more than other disciplines to bridge the gap between perceptions and evidence. As aforementioned, within the context of the dark leisure module, students are asked to reject the bulk of what they have learnt over the prior three years. This act of 'unlearning' is often challenging. At its core, the deviant leisure perspective rejects the administrative paradigm that often burdens criminological departments and within the module students are also forced to cast aside their proclivity to be susceptible to the 'airport criminologists' that often inspired their venture onto the course (Ugger and Inderbitzin, 2010). As Chancer and McLaughlin (2007) noted, "criminologists have had to confront the embarrassing fact that in a society saturated with 'crime talk" (pg. 157). It is within the remit we see the lecture halls and seminar rooms as being the heart of public criminology, students do not exist within a vacuum or exclusive to society. In our experience it is quite the latter and each year we come across students who aspire to be the next 'serial killer expert' and 'criminal profiler'. By engaging students in a critical manner we have hoped to enliven the debate and challenge the notions of the very essence of deviancy within their considerations, which intrinsically means challenging the public perceptions on key issues.

Such transitions to a more critical perception of harm and deviancy within the everyday social context can be, from our experience, rather jarring for students. Due to this a scaffolded learning approach (Larkin, 2002) underpins the module within its entirety. An emphasis on reading is put forth from the moment the module starts, with reading pro-formas provided to facilitate students to build their own narrative through the literature they are given each week. So too, as the assessment is a reflexive account of their own leisure pursuits, the first task to be completed prior to their first sessions is a day-long consumption

diary, with a week-long diary to be undertaken the following week. The first three weeks are focussed upon the core theoretical facets that underpin the deviant leisure perspective (Raymen & Smith, 2019) before moving on to a series of nine lectures that focus upon specific leisure pursuits ranging from alcohol and the nighttime economy; shopping; online gambling; media consumption; tourism; and BDSM. In weeks eight and nine two lectures are delivered that concentrate upon video games.

Design of the Session.

The session is primarily designed with a heatogological, rather than pedagogical approach at the fore. This approach is taken as a means of breaking down the traditional educational barriers pedagogy requires, replacing the one-way teaching style to be more participatory an equal as a means to prepare final students for further study or entering the work place. As a teaching team, our heutagogical approach is underpinned by research embedded teaching, thus, we have co-authored two edited collections to accompany the module materials students engage with (Kelly et al., 2020 and Lynes et al., 2022 forthcoming). The edited collection, *Video Games, Crime and Next-Gen Deviance: Reorienting the Debate* (Kelly et al., 2020) was written to challenge the myriad and myopic debates that have often dominated public criminological discourse; video games cause violence. There have been some recent developments that have transcended this rather myopic perspective and re-oriented attention towards notions of deviance within videogames, with Gray (2012), for example, examining notions of stigmatised identities and online-gaming experiences of African-American gamers. Such themes are continued within the work of kelly et al., (2020) including a chapter on the representation of LGBTQ characters within video games (Colliver, 2020), though the piece also includes chapters on the phenomenon of Swatting (Bahadur Lamb, 2020); the normalisation of gambling (Brown and Osman, 2020) and the frequency of white-collar

criminality within the industry (Kelly and Lynes, 2020) are presented. The authors acknowledge that some of these topics, such as Swatting, for instance, are indeed extreme and relatively rare occurrences, but were selected to provide a focal point in which new conversations could be had within a context saturated by outdated and myopic perspectives. Indeed, the book was exploratory in nature designed to begin new discussions and to instigate new examinations and theorisations to previously neglected or misunderstood phenomena within the medium of video games. This content is covered within the second video game centred lectures on the module. The first lecture introduces students to the importance virtual spaces have taken within our lives (Hayward, 2012) and the way in which zones of transgression have appeared within these spaces that Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) term "ludodromes" - a mediated space between "immersion in urban simulation and a real world that is simultaneously generated, destabilised and blurred by the effect of such gameplay" (Atkinson & Willis, 2007: 818).

Within this first lecture we take students through the historical precedent of new technologies being associated with violence and other assorted areas of transgression. This ranges from comics being blamed for increases in youth delinquency in the 1950's (Werthem, 1954), rap music being viewed as a propellant of urban violence (Lynes et al., 2020) and video games being seen as the causation for school shootings and other assorted atrocities (Kelly et al., 2020). We then introduce the work of Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) and their view of virtual liminal spaces in which we can consume our darkest proclivities through an act of consumption. To connect the two and exhibit the complexity of such positions covered within the lecture, rather than lecture slides being projected onto the wall we began, in 2018,

plugging in the PlayStation and allowing students to pass around the controller and ‘free roam’ around the Grand Theft Auto “ludodrome”.

Prior to attending the session students are asked to read the introductory chapter of Kelly *et al.,* (2020) and Atkinson and Rodgers (2016). These texts offer students the initial insights into how deviancy has been traditionally viewed in relation to video games and more recent theoretical perspectives on how deviancy is actually embedded within these virtual spaces. Alongside this, prior to the session students are informed that we will be utilising the PlayStation as a teaching aide and that GTA V will be utilised (including a warning on the content this could include).

The session was held in a large lecture theatre that includes desks and extra screens throughout the room to ensure all students can clearly see what is happening and are included within the experience. Unlike the traditional lecture that has a formal introduction, the session is much more casual. As students begin to enter the controller is offered to those entering, inviting them to have a turn (though usually students begin asking for a turn before the chance to offer it arises).

As the lecture hall fills the students are left for the first five to ten minutes to play the game. This is designed to create a relaxed atmosphere in which the students begin to participate, laughing at the happenings on screen and urging each other to commit acts of violence or stunts in the cars that defy the laws of physics. When the player's avatar dies (or is arrested) the lecturer takes the controller and begins to play as they start the lecture. In doing so the heutagogical nature of delivery is introduced, turning the lecture into more of a conversation than that of a traditional lecture. The actions of the first player are utilised to begin to introduce the content of the lecture and question the nature of deviancy. The lecturer

passes the controller on a few minutes in and continues to deliver the lecture content as students continue their participatory actions. Critically, the character utilised in the game is changed before being passed along. This is important as the three characters available have very different identities based upon race and social class. This offers a few clear options, as each individual takes a turn, organic conversations around the students own experiences playing games begin. So too, the way in which the virtual world interacts with the avatars of differing identities becomes apparent. Within this context more organic conversations around how class, race, gender and sexuality can develop that link into wider discussions within the module (and wider curriculum) as well as the readings for the following week (Colliver, 2020 and Hoffin and Lee-Treweek, 2020).

The choice to use Grand Theft Auto V was based upon the ability to reach these areas in one game. The game offers a vast open world, multiple characters, and is designed as a caricature of contemporary North American culture. Importantly, the accessibility settings of Grand Theft Auto enable an inclusive experience (turning on the subtitles dialogue boost etc.). Finally, it is the most sold game over the past decade (Mahmoud, 2021), meaning some level of familiarity with the game is likely to exist with members of the cohort.

Reflexive approaches

This reflection on the utility of video games utilises autoethnography. Autoethnography embraces and foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity rather than attempting to limit it, as in empirical research. Autoethnography is a highly regarded and widely used research methodology and practice whereby the researcher(s) are deeply immersed in self-experience while observing, journaling, and reflecting. “A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography" (Edwards, 2021). Specifically, data will exclusively be in the form of reflexive accounts of teaching we have kept within this time

period (four years) (Brookfield, 2017), based upon diaries and, where appropriate, field notes within the research team. So too, given multiple researchers, this will be a Collaborative Autoethnography (Lapadat, 2017). As Chang et al., (2013) notes, the collaborating researchers interact dialogically to examine and interpret the collection of autobiographical data. Alongside this, the analysis is strengthened by the contribution of multiple and diverse perspectives on the research (ibid). When multiple researchers work together, the different experiential perspectives they bring to the research can develop the analytical processes and interpretive facets. As noted by Edwards (2021), "there are examples of early ethnographic work in which researchers focused on self-experience rather than primarily on descriptions of their observations of others" (pg. 1). Such a methodology is reflexive and positions the researcher within the study, in that the author of an autoethnography is both subject and researcher (Coffey, 2002). So too, autoethnography can be undertaken with "temporal congruence or retrospectively" (Edwards, 2021: 1), with the latter consisting of the decision of the researcher to engage autoethnography at a later date than the described events. There is an emerging practice of collaborative autoethnography in which a group of people experiencing a similar phenomenon undertake research and report collectively (for example of this please see Reyes et al., 2020). With this in mind, this is a collaborative, retrospective, autoethnography consisting of the teaching team. As the researchers and participants are one and the same people, the collection and interpretation of personal data permits the researcher to speak in their own voice (Lapadat, 2017).

With regard to the recording of data, field notes are a common process of recording observations, and this method is a generally accepted form of data collection within qualitative research (Hellesø et al., 2015). Specifically, such field notes adopt a naturalistic

view, in which one studies the object under investigation to be something that we construct via the various stages of field study (ibid). The primary principle is that 'it is impossible to separate researcher from researched' (Fangen, 2010), and that the collated data develop as a core component of an interpretive process. Data collection followed Wolfinger's (2002) approach of comprehensive note taking, in which the researcher records as much data as possible during the collection process, including the recording of non-events and noting paradoxes (Peshkin, 2001). The research diary included data obtained through observation, contextual information, and reflections (Altrichter and Holly, 2005). The research diary was primarily used for interpretive sequences, which focus on 'feelings, speculations, ideas, hunches, explanations of events [and] reflections (ibid: 25). Such an addition consisted of taking theoretical notes (Newbury, 2001), which assists in 'making connections between data and understanding them' (Altrichter and Holly, 2005: 25). Theoretical notes also assists in clarifying a concept or idea, making connections between various sources of data and connecting experiences to existing theory (ibid). As noted by Vaismoradi et al., (2013), researchers are encouraged to maintain a personal research diary as a 'practical way to improve rigour' (pg. 403). Ballinger et al., (2004) note that a conscious decision is made to include and code personal memoranda alongside field notes, and the same coding scheme is used for both types of data.

The Challenges and Benefits of the Grand Theft Heutagogy

Whilst various studies in recent years have highlighted the strengths of video games as a pedagogical tools (Egenfeldt-Nielsen,2006 and Annetta, 2008), the natural starting point for this reflexive piece feels to be the challenges that we have faced whilst embedding this within teaching for the past four years, which have been numerous. Therefore, the remainder of this

article will explore the development of this approach to delivering a lecture, analysing the challenges, pitfalls, and benefits of the approach.

Covid-19 Streaming

Most notably perhaps were the challenges of delivering such content within the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, two sessions were conducted within lockdowns. Obviously, there were significant challenges due to the inability for students to actually play the game and stream it over the online sessions. To get around this issue we employed the co-production of students on the course who had disclosed they play and had access to the video games in the earlier weeks, requesting that they screen record five to ten minutes of them playing for us to stream across Teams as we conducted the session. Whilst this did work, the usual excitement and enthusiasm we see in the sessions was, understandably, not as prevalent. So too, the videos had to have the audio removed in order for students to hear us over our microphones. Within the context of online delivery, such an approach still showed some promise and benefits, with those students who already identified as gamers showing high levels of engagement and many focusing upon various aspects of video games within their final assessment. For those students who were not gamers however, whilst many stated they enjoyed the lectures and offered some fantastic critical observations in the post session discussions, we did not see the results we did within the typical in-person sessions this approach was designed for. Nonetheless, the rather unusual approach to teaching presented here still had some key strengths, especially in terms of engagement. As with the traditional classroom, motivation and engagement is still an important though arguably more challenging. As Angelino et al., (2007) denote, attrition rates within online learning are higher than within in-person teaching. Much of this is attributed to students not being adequately stimulated, thus not meeting their full potential (Chen et al., 2008). The ‘event’ of

utilising a games console within the online learning environment proved positive, with almost 25% more attendance for the sessions overall when the learner-content interaction was introduced (Moore, 1993).

'Pixelated Boobs' in the Fishbowl

Within the first session, we attempted this synchronous interactivity in a lecture theatre that is surrounded on two sides by wall to ceiling glass windows that run between the lecture hall and one of the main corridors in the building. Invariably, we often found passing students stopping as they passed and looked into the lecture theatre. This is anything but unusual within this teaching space and neither the students nor ourselves as facilitators were disturbed by such intrusions. However, as we came to the midway point of the lecture the controller was passed to a rather quiet and timid student. At this point in the lecture we were transitioning into an outline of the work of Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) that use not only video games, but also pornography websites, to demonstrate how we transgress within the ludodromes. Within this context, this unusual approach to facilitating the lecture showed its strength. To the shock of the other students in attendance the student stole a car that was driving past then traversed the map and headed directly into a gentleman's club. The student then proceeded to purchase a virtual lap-dance from a non-playable character. This rather unusual and unexpected turn of events, with students previously concentrated on the pursuit of extreme violence rather than sexual transgression, was well timed. Whilst a mixture of gasps and laughter filled the lecture hall from her peers, we had just moved onto discussing engagement with sexual taboos on the internet.

However, whilst the students unexpected trip was timely for the lecture content and demonstrated well the points we were aiming to bring to life within the taught session, we

were now trying to deliver the content with a 10-foot image of a gyrating virtual lap dancer and pixelated breasts in a room surrounded by glass, with passers-by having no context of why this was happening. One such passer-by was a (now former) member of the Deanery (who thankfully was very forgiving of our lack of foresight with the glass walls and very impressed with the innovative approach to teaching). Within this context though, timetable planning has become an increasingly important component within module planning stages to ensure that those passing the teaching spaces are not in-advertently distressed by the content that the students in our sessions are pre-warned could materialise and thus we are sensitive to the cultural and moral sensibilities of the wider student demographics.

Overwhelming Heutagogy: Teething problems

One of the most significant, and admittedly unforeseen, practical challenges faced in implementing this unique mode of delivery was maintaining student engagement and attention. Academics have stated technology may “attract and motivate students to engage in the arts” and if “used appropriately, technology can extend the reach of both the art form and that of the learner” (*National Visual Arts Standards Task Force*, 1994: 10). However, one of the initial challenges pertaining to our approach to delivery was how multiple sources of information impacted upon student engagement and, more specifically, brought to question what exactly they should be focused on at a particular time. As Richards (2006) notes, ‘too much information given in one block of time can be as futile as attempting to pour a quart of sand into a one-cup container. Students need time to absorb material’ (pg. 93). For instance, the first time we implemented this particular strategy, we provided a brief overview of the learning material and lecture content (in the form of key readings and summary of relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks). This was then followed by students taking turns with

the controller, as we injected academic commentary as to what was, at that moment, taking place on the screen. The lecture would then conclude with a “flipped learning approach” in which we asked students to tell us what they had experienced and subsequently learnt through the session. While there were some interesting and relevant discussions pertaining to the module content infused with critical reflections based on their own and other student’s actions in the digital environment (Pedler and Abbott, 2013), it was evident that certain factors could be improved. For example, Chanlin (1998) recognised the negative impact of too much visual stimuli. So too, animated graphics (in this case computer generated and interactive images) have been shown to be potentially more distracting (ibid). Similarly, as noted by Sherry (1996), visual presentations accentuating the stimulating or entertaining aspects of the topic being presented may hinder learning. These points, to a degree, were noted by the teaching team, who recorded off-topic conversations across the lecture room while another student was playing the PlayStation, more difficult classroom and noise management, and less retention of academic material including relevant concepts and theories towards the latter half of the session. With this in mind, we sought to include students as active collaborators in which we asked them to consider how such sessions could be improved. Subsequent iterations of this teaching session, informed by this collaboration, consisted of students being asked to bring their laptops and/or phones with them in order to download and engage with the pre-prepared lecture slides as a visual aid to mitigate these issues. Alongside this, to avoid sensory overload we moderated the volume of the videogame much more in future sessions, and this assisted both teachers and students to begin and continue lines of enquiry and discussion. It is important to note that, even in the first session where this unique mode of delivery was given; there were evident benefits that mitigated such challenges.

Murder, Memory and Multimedia Multitasking: Synchronous Delivery

It has long been recognised that multimedia presentations appeal to students and retain their attention longer than the traditional lecture (Liu and Beamer, 1997). So too, as Hagen et al., (1997) note, both satisfaction and participation is bolstered with such approaches. Whilst embedding video games that are actively being played via the students or the lecturer there are obviously extra challenges, namely, ensuring a smooth and coherent delivery without the typical benefit of PowerPoints to use as a prompt as information is presented. So too, at times the creative ways in which those playing choose to create unexpected havoc within the virtual environment before us can be off putting.

The real strength with the approach, however, is how the utilisation of videogames breaks down barriers between the lecturer and students. Such an approach enables the learning environment to transcend the realm of pedagogy and embed heutagogy in a subtle but impactful manner. In utilising games consoles which students are comfortable with, natural pauses can be introduced whilst students teach the lecturer cheats, short cuts or new styles of gameplay. Alongside this, with situations such as the student who chose to go to the strip club, humour naturally enters the learning space (Powell and Andreson, 1985 and Nesi, 2012). Combined, we soon found that the benefits of such an approach to teaching we had not expected emerged. Over the past four years we have had students increasingly disclose issues they needed support with immediately after the session and in the weeks that follow.

So too, within the course we have a wide range of varying demographics including but not limited to race, gender and age. As previously mentioned, the ease in which students felt within the sessions opened up avenues for students on the periphery to become more involved. For instance, an adult learner who was very diligent but did not engage with their younger peers was open that they did not understand how to play video games. Quickly, a group of students were teaching them how to use the controller, and we could see bonds

forming that lasted for the rest of the semester and into their final semester. Within this context, the unexpected consequences of what we are terming Grand Theft Heutagogy is that the learning community grew closer, an impact that lasted longer than the teaching session.Within this context, within the workshop that followed the lecture, we began to see developments of much more critical discussions taking place. Issues of the policing of black bodies developed in relation to the differing playable characters. So too, the racilisation of the non-playable characters who were sex workers arose more frequently. In short, the extreme, caricaturesque, representations of society that are utilised within the Grand Theft Auto series aided in the generation of critical discussion imperative to understanding the structural issues deeply embedded within the real world In turn this aided the engagement of diverse voices within the classroom based discussions. We believe, upon reflection, this contributed greatly to the race attainment gap on the module decreasing by 33.2% in a single year. The act of synchronous and dynamic delivery increased inclusivity dramatically and thus fostered a more welcoming and enthusiastic learning environment (Universities UK, 2016).

Conclusion

Utilising a PlayStation to play a violent and sexual explicit videogame within the teaching space whilst simultaneously delivering a lecture without visual cues seemingly goes against all conventions and wisdom. However, it has been our experience that in doing so students are enabled to become active participants within the lecture hall. They are empowered to break down the realities of some of the more detrimental manifestations of public criminology that is saturated in crime talk (Chancer and McLaughlin, 2007; Garland and Sparks, 2000). Such an approach has allowed us to embed research informed teaching whilst increasing inclusivity, retention and critical engagement. Reflexivity has been essential to the success, aiding us in identifying and overcoming numerous challenges as well as identifying

when best to use such an approach. The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to experiment with utilising the technique virtually and exposed its utility is best suited to an in-person delivery.

The onus of forward planning is an important factor to be considered. More attention must be paid to the teaching space and its suitability. A solid knowledge of the content is also needed to enable us to deliver the lecture without the usual visual prompts whilst receiving the sensory bombardment of students laughing at the bizarre acts of destruction their peers have endeavoured to commit. This is not just one sided though, forward planning to ensure that the fine balance is met for the students, to allow them to enjoy the experience but still retain knowledge is essential.

Whilst such issues must be considered and this approach is not ideally suited to many teaching sessions, the benefit of embedding this within the module has been clear. The transition from a pedagogical onus to heutagogical community (Blaschke, 2012) has been consistent and welcomed by students. We have seen great results in regard to the race attainment gap and wider inclusivity. Perhaps most importantly, alongside aiding us in developing critically engaged students we have also seen a transformational learning environment in which students have felt comfortable to disclose issues they face more readily and thus see an increased chance of success in their degree journey, as we have been able to adequately support them.

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