

The Ghost in the Machine: Legend-Tripping, Hypermodern Ostention and Ontological Bleed in the *Grand Theft Auto* Series

Andrea Andiloro

Swinburne University of Technology
John St., Hawthorn, VIC, 3122
+6141522127
aandiloro@swin.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

In a society dominated by rationalist, materialist, and scientific perspectives (Latour 2003), the idea of engaging with the supernatural may seem absurd. Daily interactions with digital technologies, including videogames, operate on a logic following 'if-then-else' statements. This logic appears to exclude unpredictable and inexplicable outcomes, shaping our perception of the world as a rule-based system devoid of any unforeseen contingencies (Wark, 2007). Much like software does not account for scenarios beyond those admitted by its code, it is assumed that nature does not permit supernatural events that deviate from its established laws (Dennett 2006). Contra such assumptions, this article suggests that traces of the supernatural still linger in our technologically driven culture. Using examples from the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) series, including *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North 2004); *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013), the article delves into the interplay between technology and the supernatural, exemplifying what Jeannie Banks Thomas (2015) termed *hypermodern folklore* — a concept emphasizing the synergy between folk, popular, consumer, and digital cultures. Hypermodern folklore is intrinsically linked to our modern technological environment and is characterized by its rapid and widespread dissemination, reminiscing thus the 'creepypasta' phenomenon (Balanzategui, 2019).

GTA games are renowned for their 'Easter eggs', which are hidden features intentionally added by the developers (Mago 2019). These can be quirky surprises or rewards for players who explore the game deeply (Ruffin Bailey 2008). A particularly popular category of Easter eggs in *GTA* relates to the supernatural, often leaning toward the eerie or unsettling. Within the *GTA* player community, these are referred to as 'myths'. They encompass phenomena like ghosts, aliens, cryptids, and haunted locations. Players who pursue refer to themselves as 'myth-hunters'. What makes *GTA* myths particularly captivating is their ontological ambiguity. While the presence of most Easter eggs is widely acknowledged (they can be found within the gameworld if one knows where to look), the existence of *GTA* myths is debated among myth-hunters (Parkin 2013).

In this article, myth-hunting is viewed as a form of legend-tripping, which is defined as a visit to a site believed to be haunted, usually involving ostension, a ritualistic

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enactment of belief (Dégh & Vázsonyi 1983). Through this lens, legends are not just stories; they encompass behaviours and experiences, with a significant emphasis on role-playing and the acting-out of belief (Ellis 2008). *Hypermodern ostension* refers to these ostensive actions facilitated by modern digital technologies (Tucker 2017). Thus, myth-hunting in *GTA* can be seen as legend-tripping that incorporates hypermodern ostension. When players engage in myth-hunting, they are enacting a legend, rather than simply experiencing its narrative content. Whether trippers actively hold supernatural beliefs is beside the point. What counts is an intent to summon a supernatural experience, or at least an openness to it. Moreover, the rituals themselves may help prime sceptical trippers, helping them transition into a mindset more receptive to interpreting their experiences as supernatural (Kinsella 2011, 31-45).

Michael Kinsella (2011, 30) proposes legend-trip structure which features: 1) initiation into the legend; 2) travel to a site and ritual performance; 3) encounter with the supernatural in the case of a successful legend-trip; 4) discussion, interpretation, and integration of the legend-trip into an existing legend complex. I observe how all these steps are fulfilled by *GTA* myth-hunters. Crucial is the role of social media both for the initiation into the legend and their discussion, interpretation, and integration. Through dedicated wikis, subreddits, and YouTube comment feeds players become familiar with myths, discuss their ontological status, report on their own legend-trips and add to the existing legend complex.

Although legend-trips are primarily seen as recreational, they typically entail challenging “conventional, experiential, and metaphysical boundaries” (Kinsella 2011, 30). I speculate that myth-hunters grapple with anxieties tied to the ontology of videogames as digital artefacts, confronting deep-seated questions about contingency versus necessity. As digital artefacts, videogames are controlled by code. Everything within them is bound by the constraints of this code, encompassing all present and future possibilities (Crogan 2011). Those myths whose existence remains debatable within the myth-hunting community suggest an 'ontological bleed', where the contingency of the non-digital world, encompassing all its myriad possibilities (including the eerie and unsettling ones), infiltrates the codified reality of the videogame, exceeding the medium's capacity for 'calculated contingency' (Ash 2010). The ontological contingency of the non-digital realm takes on a supernatural and unnerving aura when potentially present within the strictly defined, codified universe of videogames. In this context, *GTA* myths turn on its head Ian Bogost's (2006, 106) concept of *simulation fever*, which describes the discomfort players feel when a simulation does not align with their experiences of its source system due to a necessarily selective reproduction of source elements. While Bogost understands simulation fever as arising from the simulation including 'too little' of the source system, *GTA* myths suggest it might arise from the implication of the 'too much' that could potentially be included in the simulation.

BIO

Andrea Andiloro is a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre for Transformative Media Technologies at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. His dissertation focuses on the phenomenology of videogame atmosphere. He tutors in game studies and user-centered design at Swinburne University, and media studies and science and technology studies at the University of Melbourne. He is interested in videogames and media from an experiential and philosophical perspective. He has published on matters of player experience, aesthetics, genre theory and ontology.

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