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Examining Grand Theft Auto V's Successes and Tensions

Released in September 2013 for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, and later for other platforms, Grand Theft Auto V is the latest installment in Rockstar Games' long-running Grand Theft Auto franchise. Since its release, Grand Theft Auto V has achieved considerable commercial and critical success, selling over 70 million copies worldwide (Makuch) and achieving a Metacritic score of 97 on both PlayStation and Xbox, indicating "universal acclaim". Below, I will examine the factors that contributed to Grand Theft Auto V's commercial success. I argue that among other factors, Grand Theft Auto V can owe a large part of its success to its uncompromising quality as well as its introduction of innovative elements while conserving its familiar gameplay.

Examining GTA V's Commercial Success

Grand Theft Auto V is the best-selling title within its franchise and one of the best-selling video games of all time. With over 70 million copies sold as of November 2016, Grand Theft Auto V outsold the second highest selling title in its franchise, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, by more than two times (Good). Grand Theft Auto V is currently the fourth best-selling video game of all time, placing behind only Tetris, Minecraft, and Wii Sports (Tassi). To understand Grand Theft Auto V's commercial success, we turn to Cox's framework of what makes a Blockbuster video game. Cox identifies three main factors associated with an increased probability of a given title achieving high sales, namely being released by a major publisher, being released on multiple popular platforms, and being of high quality (12).

In his statistical analysis of game sales, Cox found the release of a title through a major publisher to significantly affect unit sales, explaining, “this could proxy for marketing effort or the subjective element of utility derivation, with output from different publishers often having a unique look, feel and playing style that is otherwise difficult to quantify” (8). Cox suggests that titles released through a major publisher could benefit from the publisher’s large marketing budget or from players who desire and expect trademark gameplay experiences from certain publishers. It is estimated that Grand Theft Auto V had a combined development and marketing budget of over \$265 million dollars, making it the most expensive video game ever made (Villapaz). A large part of how Grand Theft Auto V generated and sustained hype can be attributed to Rockstar Games’ continuous and extensive marketing efforts leading up to the title’s release. Additionally, Cox found that titles published by Rockstar Games had, on average, 42% higher sales compared to the base case (8). This finding seems to suggest that Rockstar titles enjoy a high level of appreciation from players, owing to consumer perception of a distinctive style and quality to Rockstar titles.

Another factor identified to have a statistically significant effect on unit sales is a title’s release on multiple platforms. Cox found that multi-platform titles sell eight percent more units than titles exclusive to single platforms on average (7). In addition to accessing larger combined installed user bases, Cox suggests that multi-platform titles, “afford greater opportunity to enjoy network externalities in allowing players to discuss and enjoy various aspects of a particular game with other gamers regardless of the specific hardware platform owned” (7). Although cross-platform titles are non-interoperable, they still have the benefit of augmenting the conversation surrounding the title, increasing its prominence in popular discourse. Grand Theft Auto V was released towards the end of the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360’s lifecycles, with both

consoles' successors being released in November 2013, two months after the title's release. Grand Theft Auto V would be re-released for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One in November 2014. Rockstar's timing of Grand Theft Auto V's release allowed the title to be sold on two generations of hardware and four console platforms. Early adopters could purchase the game for their last-generation consoles, while newer hardware owners could purchase the game when it became available for their consoles. In some cases, owners of the game for their last-generation consoles would repurchase the game for their newer consoles when they upgraded. Rockstar's rollout of Grand Theft Auto V during the transitional period between console cycles effectively allowed them to capture users of both generations of hardware as well as users who went on to upgrade their consoles.

The third factor found to have a significant effect on game sales is the quality of the title (Cox 12). In his analysis, Cox proxied title quality with their Metacritic score. He discovered, "a one unit increase in the Metacritic review score is found to increase unit sales by approximately one and a half per cent" (6). His finding suggests that title quality, as indicated by their Metacritic score, is highly correlated to their sales volume. It should come as no surprise then, that Grand Theft Auto V places eighth on Metacritic's Best Video Games of All Time list, earning a score of 97 on both PlayStation and Xbox. Furthermore, Cox suggests that, "the purchasing decisions of consumers are strongly influenced by review scores" (12). He argues that since title quality is proxied by critical response, consumers place significant weight on review scores when making purchase decisions. In addition to high review scores, Grand Theft Auto V received praise for both its technical quality and gameplay experience, with reviewers praising the design and quality of its open world as well as its narrative and gameplay (Sterling).

Grand Theft Auto V also went on to win multiple Game of the Year and Best of awards, further attesting to its quality (IMDb).

In addition to the three factors mentioned above, Cox found titles that are part of an existing franchise and titles that have a mature rating had increased unit sales by around six and ten percent respectively (7). The Grand Theft Auto series is one of the most successful video game franchises of all time, with over 220 million sales worldwide, placing it within the ranks of Mario, Pokémon, and Call of Duty (Haywald). Grand Theft Auto V sales benefited from a large existing fan base and brand recognition owing to the popularity of its franchise. Additionally, Grand Theft Auto V contains its trademark violence and adult themes, earning it a mature rating from the ESRB.

Raising the Stakes

Following the commercial and critical success of its predecessor, Grand Theft Auto IV, which went on to sell over 25 million units (Futter) and reach third place on Metacritic's Best Video Games of All Time list, with a score of 98, Grand Theft Auto V had a very high standard to live up to. Grand Theft Auto V was in development for more than five years and was one of the most highly anticipated games of 2013 (Spike). Given the success of its previous titles and the immense anticipation surrounding Grand Theft Auto V, Rockstar Games was under great pressure to deliver a product that would live up to industry and fan expectations.

While the Grand Theft Auto series has gained a certain cachet within the games industry, Rockstar Games has continuously innovated on its franchise. Tschang lists the Grand Theft Auto series as an example of combinative innovation within the video games industry (1002). He suggests that the series' evolution from a top-down action game to a 3D action game in Grand Theft Auto III effectively defined the genre of open world action games (1002). By combining a

3D perspective with the established conventions of its top-down action games, Rockstar was able to create an immersive gameplay experience that gave players a first-person view of the open world (Tschang, 1002).

I argue that subsequent Grand Theft Auto titles, V included, have presented incremental innovations, or extensions and refinements, to the genre-defining Grand Theft Auto III. Incremental innovations allow developers to reduce risk by leveraging their existing intellectual property to create games that have precedents for commercial success. However, Tschang points out that, “competition in cultural industries is driven by a search for novelty. However, while consumers expect novelty in their cultural goods, they also want novelty to be accessible and familiar” (990). The challenge then, for Rockstar Games was to make Grand Theft Auto V novel enough so that players did not feel as they were playing the same game repackaged in better graphics but at the same time, familiar enough so that players could enjoy the style of play the franchise has come to be known for.

Perhaps the most drastic change in Grand Theft Auto V compared to its predecessors is its multi-character narrative. In previous Grand Theft Auto titles, the games were experienced through the perspective of a single protagonist. Aaron Garbut, art director at Rockstar North, described the decision to move to a multi-character structure as, “a leap of faith... but it also felt like a change to the core of the game that might backfire” (O'Brien). Garbut's apprehensions are understandable, given that the single character narrative has been at the core of the franchise since its beginning. The decision to move to a multi-character narrative was also informed by positive feedback received from Grand Theft Auto IV's expansion packs, which introduced new protagonists with interwoven stories (Stuart).

Grand Theft Auto V's multi-character structure has considerable implications for its gameplay experience. The game allows players to switch between characters both during free roam and during certain missions. Leslie Benzies, Grand Theft Auto V's producer stated that the ability to switch between three protagonists streamlines the transition between free roam and missions, and allows players to explore the open world more freely by not having to worry about travelling back to a mission start point, a criticism of earlier titles in the franchise (Simmons). Additionally, the ability to switch between characters during missions introduces a strategic element to the gameplay, as players have the option to use multiple characters in various ways to complete the mission, increasing player choice, and making missions less predictable. Overall, Rockstar's "leap of faith" clearly paid off, as Grand Theft Auto V's multi-character structure presents a welcome departure from the single character narrative of its predecessors, addressing criticisms and introducing new gameplay elements while staying faithful to the trademark Grand Theft Auto action.

Another change introduced in Grand Theft Auto V are heists. The game is centered around several robberies that the player completes missions to prepare for and presents players with multiple approaches to complete. Heists deviate from typical Grand Theft Auto mission structure by breaking down the preparation into smaller sub-missions, presenting the player with multiple approaches to the mission, and allows the player to seamlessly switch between all three characters. Heist missions work particularly well with the game's multi-character narrative because they involve collaboration between the game's three protagonists. Sam Houser, the co-founder of Rockstar Games, stated that heists were informed by positive response to the bank robbery mission, "Three Leaf Clover", in Grand Theft Auto IV, "We wanted to have a couple of really strong bank robberies. It felt like that was a good device that we'd never used in the past.

Repeating ourselves is a fear when we're doing games where part of the evolution is just technological” (Miller). Houser suggests that part of the reason Grand Theft Auto V is centered around heists is because they had not been used as main mission devices in previous titles. Overall, heists introduce a new mission structure that bring a breath of fresh air to the franchise and integrates tightly with the game’s multi-character narrative. In Houser’s words, the heist mission structure still manages to, “feel like Grand Theft Auto, but fresh” (Miller).

In a 2011 interview, Dan Houser stated, “I think the future for us is to continue doing new things... It's in our DNA to avoid doing what other companies are doing” (Harmon). I think Rockstar’s challenge moving forward isn’t avoiding what other companies are doing, but rather avoiding repeating themselves. Grand Theft Auto V represents the gold standard for open world adventure games. It has become the franchise’s most successful title to date, owing to its high quality, fresh innovation, and faithfulness to its roots. Although it is difficult to imagine a more successful sequel, Grand Theft Auto V has produced a gameplay experience that has proven to capture seasoned fans and newcomers to the franchise alike, while being innovative and raising the franchise to unprecedented heights.

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