

Class Struggle from the Couch

On Sept. 17, *Grand Theft Auto V*, the latest installment in the wildly popular video game franchise, will be released for the Playstation 3 and Xbox 360, perhaps as one of the final major games for the current console generation.

Older readers may not be aware, but video games have developed quite a bit since the *Pac-Man* booths of yore. Games increasingly include sophisticated plots, top-of-the-line voice acting, and graphics that could be mistaken on first glance for live-action film. I have little doubt their quality will increase exponentially in years to come and they will represent one of the most important media of the 21st century. Back in 2011, *The Economist* reported the video-gaming industry was already three-fifths the size of the movie industry. For that reason alone, games deserve serious critical attention.

I'd like to take the opportunity of *GTA V*'s release to examine, as one might books or movies, how its publisher, Rockstar, has dealt with political themes. Specifically, as a fellow traveler myself, I'd like to look at the publisher's portrayal of socialism and class struggle. I'll do this through the lens of Rockstar's earlier games, *Red Dead Redemption* and *L.A. Noir*.

Red Dead Redemption is a 2010 action and adventure game inspired by the spaghetti westerns of filmmakers such as Sergio Leone. Now, you should know, I'm not a die-hard gamer. I haven't played everything out there, or even close. During the opening character-creation sequence of *Skyrim*, a game which hardcore reviewers were in ecstasies over, I got bored and gave up. But I LOVED *Red Dead Redemption*. And yes, the caps lock is necessary. It boasts a beautifully rendered world, solid character development and a well-written story. So if you've never picked up a controller or haven't in a while, give *RDR* a chance.

Part of the game is set in the Mexican Revolution. It's my understanding that some of the characters are based on real-life figures but I'll leave discussion of the release's historical accuracy to those with more knowledge of the subject. I am, sadly, just another dumb gringo.

RDR's central protagonist is a bounty hunter named John Marston. Asked whether he is a socialist, he explains, "I'm many things, most of them bad. But a man of political principles? No." Marston fights on both sides of the conflict before throwing in his lot with the rebels, seemingly more out of personal loyalty than ideological conviction.

Rockstar portrays the Mexican dictatorship as brutally corrupt, though eventually paints the rebel leadership as little better. Similarly, the publisher seems sympathetic to the revolutionary rank-and-file, while also suggesting they are naive. Luisa Fortuna, a selfless peasant fighter, is perhaps the game's most uniformly likable character. She speaks passionately of the struggle without Rockstar imposing a noticeable sense of irony. At the same time, however, she is in love with a local guerrilla leader, who admits to Marston he would never marry a peasant and is revealed to be something of a political tyrant-in-waiting. His insincere commitment to Fortuna and the rebel cause is perhaps explained by his upper-class origins.

In the end, Rockstar sides with the rebels, but quite unenthusiastically. Whether this is an appropriate position, given how the revolution turned out, is a question I'll leave for those with more knowledge of Mexico's history. But the publisher seems to go further, cynically suggesting government can never be representative of the people's interests, no matter the circumstances, no matter how much the masses struggle. This, of course, leaves no room for progressive change.

L.A. Noir, also published by Rockstar, is a 2011 pulpy

period piece set in the 1940s. Unfortunately, it's not fractionally as fun as *RDR*. There's very little overarching story or character development to propel you forward, and the cases you work through could probably be played in any sequence, as you might watch the TV show *Law & Order*, without missing much.

One investigation could be interpreted as an implicit criticism of Red Scare hysteria. The central protagonist, a police officer, investigates a series of suspicious fires he believes to be connected. The game leads you to charge a low-level gas company employee found in possession of anarchist pamphlets, specifically Peter Kropotkin's *Law and Authority*. And if I'm following the game's twists and turns correctly, the employee is actually innocent.

Another investigation, however, introduces us to a communist character who, while also falsely charged, is the most unflattering representation of a leftist in either *L.A. Noir* and *RDR*. The guy's insufferably snotty and just in case you didn't pick this up from what he says, he's wearing an ascot. I mean, an ascot? But it doesn't stop there. He looks down on working class people and beats women, just in case you didn't get that he is a monstrous hypocrite too.

Of course, we live in a conservative country where, according to Gallup, only 36 percent of the population has a positive view of socialism, however it may be defined. So it makes sense that a major game publisher would present an ambiguous-to-negative view of economic democracy and those who work for it. Have readers out there played any other games, by Rockstar or other publishers, that deal with issues of class struggle?

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