

Vesna Lopičić
University of Niš, Serbia

GTA IV: BREAKING OR MAKING A STEREOTYPE? VIDEO GAME AS PROPAGANDA

Abstract. This paper problematizes the effect of one of the latest Rockstar Games' productions, *Grand Theft Auto IV (GTA IV)*. The alleged intention of this video game developers was to break up the stereotype of a video game character in terms of character complexity and moral dichotomy. They even endowed the main character with a name, Niko Bellic. A brief analysis of his psychological profile leaves doubts as to his originality, but not as to his ethnicity. The stereotype formed on wrong assumptions consequently does not seem to be broken at all, if indeed that was the original intention. Knowing the power of the entertainment industry to influence young players, it seems that Rockstar Games reinforced an erroneous stereotypical image of Serbian nationals that should be corrected rather than reiterated.

While leafing through an old 2008 issue of *Maisonneuve*, a Canadian journal designed with the idea of satisfying eclectic curiosity, my eye was first caught by a series of photographs and then by the title of the article they illustrated. The photographs were all perfect animations of scenes taken, I later realised, from different video games. There were 23 of them and they were all gripping, especially to an unaccustomed eye, which I admit mine is. Apart from the game of *Solitaire*, played a few times many years ago, I have never ventured into the world of video games. Yet, the title of this article, *Can a Video Game Make You Cry?*, drew my attention and made me read the text. It was written by Jon Evans who investigated the genre of video games just as the technological sub-culture is nearing its fiftieth birthday. The article was most informative because Mr. Evans briefly outlined the history of video games from its beginnings with *Pac-Man* in the early eighties to the latest Rockstar Games' production *Grand Theft Auto IV (GTA IV)*, released in 2008.

I was made aware of one of the dilemmas of video games developers, i.e. whether to make their games more narrative or action based. It would be logical that the same impulse that drove humanity to tell stories in the oral tradition, then in books and later in films should control the popularity of video games. Our interest in plot and character seems unlikely to slacken or die. However, one of the Electronic Arts producers, Reid Schneider, explains that there is a great difference between narrative in gameplaying and any other storytelling medium: "The story is non-linear. Game creators don't control the pacing. So the emotional experience of gaming is less about plot and more about the characters" (Evans, 36). Indeed, in the world of video games, the player has ultimate control: he can choose the layers, he can gear the course of the story and he can even decide on the final outcome of the game. It appears that the post-modern novel is very similar to a video game in this respect; yet, though the reader participates and stories often have multiple endings, the reader definitely does not have the same power over the characters as does the video game player. Even Stephen Spielberg is fascinated with video game narratives: "The challenge of story-telling in a non-linear way is very exciting. With a film you start with a story and end a couple of hours later. Games take hours of exploration" (Spielberg).

As a teacher of literature, I found these comparisons most interesting, although Mr. Evans came to the conclusion that all video games share the same simplistic pattern:

...Video games are only about the visceral gratification of solving puzzles and blowing things up: meaningless, escapist entertainment; devoid of gravitas, psychological depth, and vivid characterization. Even story-driven games like *BioShock* provide no actual story, only enough pretext to give the gameplay traction; and who could possibly care about the characters of a pretext? (Evans, 38).

I believe it is for this reason that I was never interested in gameplaying, which comes down mostly to "a series of mazes that players must explore, while killing or escaping bad guys and collecting stuff" (Evans, 38). The visual beauty of the games that precludes my imagination from constructing it, which happens when one reads a novel, however compelling, is further depleted by the lack of a true story with moral complexity. In the world of video games things are usually very simple and the moral dichotomy over-ruling: you are either good or bad, killing or killed. Although gamers may identify with some of the usually unnamed player-characters and

some companion-bonding happens with emotionally wrenching scenes, the characters are like empty templates that the players cannot project onto.

It was like this for almost thirty years before a new game was released. Evans makes sure to explain how *GTA IV* was a watershed in the gaming industry whose huge profits will probably transform the pattern of video games and make them more thought-provoking. The change was brought about by the design of the main character whose appearance was dramatically announced by Jon Evans: "Enter Niko Bellic" (39). The name struck me as very symbolic, Nobody White, which is how it roughly translates into Serbian. Still, I thought it was my overactive imagination that was immediately reading into the text associations from my own culture and language. Reading further, I was made even more curious by the description of Niko:

Rockstar Games has created, for the first time in the history of video gaming, a human character who even non-gamers talk about by name. A sardonic, strong-and-silent veteran of the Balkan civil wars, Bellic arrives in Liberty City – an ersatz New York – searching for the American dream, but instead gets caught up in crime (Evans, 39).

A person from our part of the world has to wonder: Who is this Niko? Which part of the Balkans does he come from? If he took part in the Balkan civil wars, he must be one of us. Ethnic identification in this case is more than significant because in a war a division into Us and Them becomes most important, especially if the war is not mainly economic but runs mostly along the lines of religion, ethnicity, and political options. This may seem as an irrelevant piece of information to a gamer, but the blogs suggest otherwise. There were heated debates revolving round the question of whether Niko was Croatian, Serbian, or Bosnian. Other options had been quickly ruled out. Yet, before I learned about this issue, I first checked Wikipedia to see what was at stake in this game. The synopsis is brief enough. This is how it all started:

Grand Theft Auto IV follows the story of Niko Bellic, an illegal immigrant and veteran of the Bosnian War. After persuasion from his cousin Roman who immigrated to America years prior to the game's opening, Niko leaves Eastern Europe to come to Liberty City, where he hopes to forget his criminal past and pursue the American Dream. After his arrival,

however, Niko quickly learns that Roman's tales of riches and luxury were lies concealing Roman's struggles with debt and gangsters. Niko aids Roman in his troubles while hoping to carve out a new life for himself in the city (Wikipedia 1).

The end is more interesting because it offers a moral choice, which is one of the novelties introduced by *GTA IV*: "The story features two possible endings depending on the choice made by the player at this point in the game. The player can choose to have Niko exact revenge on Dimitri or make a deal with him" (Wikipedia 1).

All this proved to be most appealing to the impatient game players so that success was immediate. "Upon release, *Grand Theft Auto IV* claimed two entertainment industry sales records, posting the best single-day and seven-day sales totals for a video game. The game sold more than 3.6 million copies on its first day of availability (garnering \$310 million in sales), while also selling 6 million copies in the first week of availability (garnering \$500 million in sales)" (Wikipedia 1). The developers, Rockstar Games located at Edinburgh and Toronto, had a good reason to be satisfied, since they had invested a lot. Overall, *Grand Theft Auto IV* took over 1000 people and more than three and a half years to complete, with a total cost estimated at approximately \$100 million, making it the most expensive game ever developed. Clearly, on the very first day the game paid back double. The story writers, Dan Houser and Rupert Humphries, were also overjoyed at the reception of the game which had won many prestigious awards by the end of 2008. *Grand Theft Auto IV* is the first and only game in the series to be awarded a "10" by IGN¹.

Besides superlative praises, there was also some severe criticism. Mothers Against Drunk Driving insisted that the game should be rated for adults only because of the main character's ability to drink and drive. At the beginning of the game there is a brief scene containing full-frontal male nudity, which some may find offensive. "According to the Guinness World Records 2009 Gamer's Edition, it's the most controversial videogame series ever, with over 4,000 articles published about it, which include accusations of glamorizing violence, corruption of gamers, and connection to real life crimes" (Wikipedia 2). Part of the public believes that young players will try to emulate extreme violence, hate crimes, and deliberate sex indulgence they witness in the course of the game. The exploitative

¹ IGN (abbreviated and formerly known as Imagine Games Network) is a multimedia news and reviews website that focuses heavily on video games.

and violent attitude towards women who are mainly represented as prostitutes is also criticised.

However, nobody responded in the manner of Jean-Robert Lafortune of the Haitian American Grassroots Coalition who is quoted as saying that:

“The game shouldn’t be designed to destroy human life, it shouldn’t be designed to destroy an ethnic group,” for this and similar scenarios, including lines in the game’s script such as “kill the Haitian dickheads” during an altercation between the player and a Haitian gang. After the threat for having been sued by the Haitian-American Grassroots Coalition, Rockstar removed the word “Haitians” from this phrase in the game’s subtitles (Wikipedia 2).

Apart from the attitude shared by all, at least given lip service, that human life should not be destroyed, Lafortune’s reaction brings up the issue of violence against an ethnic group. The most obvious form of such violence was the above example from *GTA3*, where the player is invited to kill people only because they are members of a certain ethnic group, while in *GTA IV* that violence takes a more subtle form. “Enter Niko Bellic.”

Niko Bellic is a criminal. Whatever his personal background, whatever his motives for moving to the States, however psychologically sensitive he is, he still kills. “For the first time in the series, *Grand Theft Auto IV* features ‘morality choices’ at several points throughout the game, in which the player is forced to choose between killing a character or sparing their life or killing one of two characters. The game has two different endings, which are determined by deciding which of the two missions to complete. The player can choose between a revenge mission or a deal mission, each leads to a different ending”, claims the synopsis, but in truth the endings do not differ that much. Niko kills either Jimmy Pegorino who first kills his girlfriend, Kate McReary in Version 1, or he kills Dimitri Rascalov who kills his cousin Roman at his own wedding in Version 2. Niko Bellic proves to be a cold blooded murderer, however proud his designers were of their masterpiece.

However, what is more disturbing is not that Niko Bellic is a stock character from a video game or an action movie, but a character with a name and an ethnic background. Evans explains: “Whatever the reason, until the end of 2007, the heroes of most games were literal nobodies: anonymous, inoffensive blank slates” (Evans, 39). The next question

is, why did Rockstar Games decide, this time, to name their new hero and turn nobody into Niko. Were they trying to break the stereotypical representation of an anti-hero as worthless social scum who was denied a name because he did not deserve it or was something else intended? Or maybe they simply wanted to make sure their profits would soar by designing a character with an identity already denigrated simply because he comes from a certain nation? It is impossible to answer these questions with absolute certainty, but establishing the ethnic identity of Niko Bellic might throw some light on the ambiguity of his position.

Before the game was released, the bloggers started fighting over Niko's ethnic identity. The claims that he was either Italian or Russian were quickly dispelled while the debate over his Croatian, Bosnian or Serbian origin lasted longer. His being a Croat or Muslim from Bosnia was also soon ruled out since his family name in that case should have been spelt 'Bijelic' or 'Bjelic', not 'Bellic.' Therefore, he was Serbian. The form 'Bellic' was either incorrectly spelt 'Belic' or maybe the 'l' was doubled on purpose to indicate that it is preceded by a monophthong /e/, since Serbian spelling is phonetical and letters are doubled only in some special cases. It may also be an omission made under the influence of the English language. Further, the family name Belic is more common in Bosnia than in Serbia proper, so it is very likely that Niko Bellic comes from the Serbian region of Bosnia. His first name is the shortened version of Nikola, a very popular Serbian name, which is often abbreviated to Niko in Montenegro or the Republic of Srpska.

When the bloggers started playing the game, there was plenty of evidence testifying to Bellic's Serbian origin. The BradyGames guide, for example, says on page 10: Our story begins aboard the Platypus ... one of the crew is a Serbian national named Niko Bellic. There was also some irrefutable proof in the language Niko was occasionally using, like: "Zdravo, burazeru" (Hi, brother), "Neverovatno" (Unbelievable) or at the very beginning of the game when Niko and Roman are talking, Niko reprimands him saying: "What's wrong, Roman, have you forgotten our language?" and Roman replies: "No, cousin, it's been awhile... speak English, your English is better than my Serbian." If this is not enough, we later learn that his mother's name is Milica, which is definitely related to Serbian heritage. The bloggers stopped discussing this issue since there was no point proving or disproving something so obvious: Niko Bellic is a Serbian national.

There is probably no doubt that all the gamers identified with Niko as their player-character who becomes the means of satisfying various needs: excitement, adrenalin rush, aggression drive, as solutions to the

problems of depression, boredom, dissatisfaction etc. Yet, even if they get emotionally attached to Niko and do not see him as a virtual tool for the gratification of their various desires, Niko still remains a criminal. Their possible bonding with him will most likely not prevent the players from overgeneralising his character into a picture of a typical Serb. That is exactly the danger of this vastly popular video game. If it sold six million copies in the first week, how many millions of young people have by now, a year later, come to the conclusion or rather the confirmation of the stereotypical representation of Serbs created through the inimical propaganda after the beginning of the Balkan wars? There may be some statistics on that, but hundreds of millions have definitely once again seen a Serb in a negative light.

Enter Niko Bellic actually means: Enter Serbians. What are they like? "His father was an alcoholic who bullied him. His mother, Milica, had a maternal and caring nature, and regretted that a decent person like Niko was forced to grow up in such a harsh environment. He grew up during the harsh times of the Yugoslav wars, in which he participated as an angry youth" (Wikipedia 3). The conclusion easily drawn by many unthinking and uninformed young players will be that these Serbs really drink too much, that they are awful fathers, that their women are weak and ineffective as mothers, and that Niko is a victim, an angry and frustrated man who searched for self-realisation in the war. Did he become a hero then? The official description of his character runs further: "Niko witnessed and committed numerous atrocities during the war, which led to his cynical perspective on life, and a certain degree of regret, depression, and emotional detachedness" (Wikipedia 3). Evidently, however victimised Niko was in his childhood, he becomes a war criminal now capable of unspeakable deeds which explains his later psychological profile. He regrets the terrible things he did, he is depressed at the memory of the crimes, and the only way to go is to detach himself from genuine emotions so that what drives him now cannot be love but blood-thirsty revenge. The need for revenge in his case is justified, but if it leaves a person emotionally crippled it is definitely not commendable. Ergo, Serbs are a psychologically damaged nation. He cannot be given even the saving grace of the corrupting influence of America. He went there illegally (therefore as an offender), he got caught up in crime (what else, for a man who never had an honest job), and to top it all, his close cousin and host in the States turns out to be a deceptor and a failure who owes gambling debts to many criminals (as if Niko could have a decent relative!).

For the sake of truth, he is given some positive characteristics: he is protective of his family, he helps various random people, he has a distaste for drugs, he is mature and sensible. At the same time, he manifests typical Serbian attitudes towards America and its values: he is confused and mildly disgusted with American culture, annoyed by its rampant materialism, too sarcastic for the average person and, above all, incapable of letting go of the past. The story is dominated by this weakness of his which again may be by many attributed to all Serbs. Our stubborn adherence to historical tradition, cultural heritage, and out-dated moral norms may be the reason, in the view of the players, for what happened to Serbia as a nation. The fault is somehow with Us, not Them.

Radomirović commented on Niko's character as early as 9 May 2008 in *Politika*:

Serbs have, after a few noted but side-roles as bad guys in Hollywood, finally got their first main character in the American entertainment industry. If we may give him that title, taken into account that the character of Niko Bellic – a killer, violent person and smuggler – is far from the ideal (Radomirović, 7)².

It is fair to say that Niko is a real anti-hero. He admits to killing people and human trafficking as the worst of his crimes besides numerous smaller offences, justifying these atrocities with the 'complexity of life'. There is not a single positive Serbian character in the game except for Florian Cravic, Niko's army friend, who is a homosexual dating the deputy mayor of Liberty City.

It is somewhat disturbing that the first time Serbs are allowed the public stage and huge (video games) audience, they are represented as negative characters, especially if they were previously given as much negative publicity by the media during the civil wars in Yugoslavia.

Going back to the intention of the story writers and the developers, Rockstar Games, Houser said, "In terms of the character, we wanted something that felt fresh and new and not something that was obviously derived from [a] movie" (Wikipedia 1). It is our belief that when one wants something 'fresh' and 'new,' they should not resort to stereotype, which Niko Bellic definitely is. He is a bad guy. They wanted some innovation, they wanted to break the stereotype of an anonymous character-player who is little more than an animated tool. John Lanchester describes it ironically:

² Translation V.L.

The Grand Theft Auto games, for example, are notorious (especially among people who've never played them) for their apparent celebration of random violence. The most recent iteration of the game, however, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, involves the main character having to spend a large amount of time building up his relationships, so that he can have people to help him do his criminal thing; and building up these relationships involves driving to see these people, taking them out to nightclubs, and sitting there with them" (Lanchester, 19).

The irony is that Niko seems to be more human than other characters of the industry, while all his friendship-making efforts are aimed at manipulating people into committing crimes. He is a brazen criminal despite the freshness of his complex psychology and his moral dilemmas. Revenge as his motive is a standard of the gameplay trade so that it does not bring any change either. His committing random acts of kindness does not testify to his perfectibility since he remains a killer to the end. The stereotype of a video game character consequently does not seem to be broken at all, if indeed that was the original intention. The only difference turns out to be his identity as if of all ethnicities in former Yugoslavia, of all Balkan nations, of all peoples in the world, only a fictional Serb held the promise of breaking a deeply-rooted stereotype of the entertainment industry.

Being the easiest place to start the process of learning about a society and defining one's place in it or in relation to it, social stereotypes help develop consciousness and help develop identity. Nevertheless, they are a two-way street: externally and internally imposed, serving both good and bad purposes, and influenced by education and economic prosperity. It is when they take on a life of their own that stereotypes become dangerous commodities. Social representations, frames and stereotypes have a normative power, establishing judgments of value, and stereotypes can also produce constraining and ill-advised behaviours (Radić-Bojanić, 260).

Time will tell whether the storyline will begin to dominate over the character in the video games to come in future. It also remains to be seen if video games will be navigated more towards art than entertainment. If it is known that in 2008 video games overtook music and video, combined,

in the UK, and left book sales far behind, it is very important what sort of content may be found in them. Instead of reading, young people will play games and build their picture of moral values. Maybe Rockstar Games made a significant breakthrough and produced a character out of the ordinary villain-stereotype, but they certainly reinforced an erroneous stereotypical image of Serbian nationals that should be corrected rather than reiterated. By naming their most recent character and endowing him with a definite ethnic origin, they abuse the trust of their players.

Enter Niko Bellic. Beware!

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