

# **Antifeminism and Misogyny in *Grand Theft Auto* Games**

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# Introduction

## *1.1 Background of the GTA Series*

The *GTA (Grand Theft Auto)* game series was first launched in 1997 by BMG Interactive but was originally developed by DMA Design, later known as Rockstar North. It has grown into one of the most recognisable, though controversial, franchises in gaming history. Initially, the first games were top-down view and 2D, then the franchise transformed significantly after Rockstar Games took over. They published *GTA III* in 2001, and the series transitioned into a 3D open-world game, and this innovation set a new standard for sandbox games. As Sara Humphreys explains, “The narrative systems of open world games enable players to engage with the game on many levels rather than simply follow a linear narrative path. Similar to a novel, there are multiple storylines-possibly in the hundreds-which creates a highly immersive experience.” (201)

It has evolved beyond this significantly over the decades, becoming a culturally influential entertainment and a cultural phenomenon, influencing internet memes, movies, and discussions over violence and morality in video games. In the games, players are given freedom to explore the world on their own, but they can also engage in storylines by completing missions. These quests often include nefarious activities, namely driving vehicles recklessly and engaging in combat with both civilians and law enforcement.

Each installment introduces new protagonists, who are typically criminals seeking power, revenge or wealth, while also navigating a world riddled with corruption. The most recent main installment, *GTA V*, features three protagonists: Michael, a retired criminal with a dysfunctional family, Trevor, a violent criminal who struggles with substance abuse, and

Franklin, an ambitious young man seeking a better life. In *Grand Theft Auto Online*, which was introduced alongside *GTA V*, players can team up or compete in activities like heists and races.

The games are also known for their dark humour and satirical portrayal of American society and the depiction of stereotypes. The games often do it by reinforcing negative stereotypes, particularly regarding women.

### *1.2 Defining Antifeminism and Misogyny*

Misogyny in *Grand Theft Auto* is not just a background element but an integral part of its mechanics, demonstrating how the gaming industry and particularly *GTA* embeds gendered violence into its entertainment. Misogyny, according to Judith M. Bennett, is “woman-hating”. (167) This often manifests in discrimination, objectification, and violence. It includes attitudes and actions that dehumanise women by portraying them as inferior to men or as objects for male pleasure. In her study, Bennett's discussion of alewives being unfairly labeled as deceitful and immoral due to misogynistic cultural biases can be related to *GTA V*, particularly in the way Amanda De Santa, Michael, the protagonist's wife, is portrayed in her extramarital affairs. In the game, Amanda is repeatedly caught cheating on her husband, reinforcing the stereotype of the unfaithful woman who cannot be trusted. Much like how medieval alewives were seen as dishonest simply because they were women in business, Amanda's character is framed in a way that supports a negative perception of women, suggesting that they are naturally deceptive and driven by selfish desires. The game's narrative presents Michael's criminality and violent tendencies with some degree of sympathy, while Amanda's infidelity is treated as humiliating and frustrating for him. This is in parallel with how alewives were unfairly scrutinised compared to their male counterparts. Just as misogynistic attitudes contributed to women being forced out of brewing, *GTA V*

perpetuates the idea that women are untrustworthy and problematic, reinforcing harmful gender biases.

An antifeminist, on the other hand, is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “A person who is opposed to feminism, sexual equality, or the advocacy of women's rights. Also occasionally: a person who is hostile to women.” Thus, this includes the rejection of the idea that women should have equal rights, opportunities, and societal roles as men. In the context of video games, these are often depicted in the portrayal of female characters, narrative choices, the behaviour encouraged among players, the trivialisation of violence against female characters, and the reinforcement of stereotypes that contribute to the marginalisation of women. The *GTA* series epitomises these trends, with its narratives frequently reflecting gender biases. This is evident in the way female characters are often relegated to secondary or objectified roles that exist solely to advance the male characters. Additionally, the lack of strong, independent female protagonists in the series reinforces the idea that power, agency, and influence belong primarily to male characters.

## 2. Antifeminism and Misogyny in *GTA*

### 2.1 Rock Star Games' Work Culture

Antifeminist themes within Rockstar Games' titles are rooted in the company's internal dynamics, as the hostile treatment of women in *Grand Theft Auto* mirrors real-world accounts of misogyny within the company's workplace environment, which demonstrates how gender bias influences the development of a video game and the final product. Jason Schreier published an article, "*Inside Rockstar Games' Culture Of Crunch*", on the website Kotaku, in which he described the development of Rockstar Games' 2018 video game, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, when employees had to participate in crunch culture, working excessive periods of overtime. In the article, Schreier described how, during the final year of the game's development, directors decided to add cinematic black bars to cutscenes to enhance the game's aesthetic appeal. This seemingly minor artistic choice necessitated weeks of additional work, compelling employees to work nights and weekends to meet deadlines. These practices have fostered an environment where extended overtime is normalised, with employees enduring months or even years of relentless work schedules.

This culture of overwork and disregard for employee well-being reveals a pattern within the company that not only demands relentless labour but also makes it possible for allegations to rise about workplace harassment. Detailed in the article "*Former Rockstar Designer Says Former Top Executive Groped Him*" by Schreier, during the development of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Jeronimo Barrera, a former Rockstar executive, allegedly groped Bundschu during a work function. The sexual misconduct allegations against Barrera were dismissed, and the alleged victim's account was deemed as unsubstantiated. (Schreier) The investigation involved "speaking to Barrera and others present, and following a dispute over whether Barrera had denied the accusation or told Rockstar he didn't remember". (Schreier)

The article did not mention a more thorough investigation, although in the article, coworkers and managers said that he “had a reputation for screaming at people, and there were rumors that he had shouted at staff who’d rubbed him the wrong way, telling them they were fired.”, thus, he had a reputation of exploiting his power. This type of misconduct with Rockstar’s reputation for enforcing “crunch” periods and overtime, reveals a workplace culture that not only tolerates but arguably fosters environments where power imbalances and inappropriate behaviour can flourish unchecked. This mirrors the world Rockstar depicts in its games, where misogyny and the abuse of power are not only common but often go unpunished.

## *2.2 Violence and Harassment in Gameplay and Gaming Communities*

The harassment women face in the gaming industry, as seen in the Gamergate controversy, conveys the issues within gaming culture, where in-game depictions of violence and gender stereotypes contribute to a cycle that often marginalises women, both as characters and creators, and shapes the way they are treated within the community. Violence in video games is frequently a central gameplay element, where characters engage in physical aggression as the primary means of driving the narrative. In many games, especially in open-world and action genres, violence is presented as an integral part of the player experience, like in the *GTA* titles. In video games, players are often rewarded for their ability to commit violent acts, whether it’s through combat, shooting, or other forms of aggression. This violence is often depicted as necessary for success, with the player’s character frequently engaging in brutal acts to overcome obstacles or to defeat enemies. This structure positions aggression as a necessity, tied to a player’s progression and success. While violence can be directed at a variety of in-game targets, female characters are often disproportionately cast as helpless, background victims rather than active participants and thus the victims of such forces. Many games depict women as vulnerable, passive, or disposable, reinforcing

prevalent stereotypes that associate femininity with weakness and victimhood. In *Grand Theft Auto*, female non-playable characters are frequently subject to acts of violence from the players, including being run over, being assaulted, or killed with little to no narrative consequence. These depictions reduce women to objects within the game's violent playground and normalise their victimisation as part of the entertainment experience, and this trend is mirrored in the broader gaming community and industry culture. This further contributes to the problematic portrayal of women in gaming, where their roles are often secondary to the male protagonists who drive the narrative.

Similarly, women in real life face similar scrutiny, which is detailed in Harmeet Kaur's article titled "*How Gamergate foreshadowed the toxic hellscape that the internet has now become*". In the article, he explained the 2014 Gamergate harassment campaign and exposed the deep misogyny embedded in gaming spaces. As described by Kaur, Gamergate began when developer Zoë Quinn was subjected to online abuse following the publication of false allegations about their personal life. Although it started as targeted harassment against one developer, it later expanded to include other women in gaming, such as critic Anita Sarkeesian and developer Brianna Wu, who faced coordinated campaigns of doxing, rape threats, and death threats. Though Gamergate was framed by its supporters as a movement for ethics in video game journalism, it was widely recognised as a misogynistic backlash against increased visibility and critique of sexism in games.

### *2.3 The Portrayal of Women in GTA*

While *Grand Theft Auto* is often defended as satire, its portrayal of women and gender roles reinforces misogynistic attitudes, which blur the line between social commentary and the normalisation of harmful stereotypes. On the surface, *GTA* often mocks traditional power structures, exposing the greed and violence that define its world. It mocks politicians,

law enforcement, corporate elites, and the media, suggesting that corruption is pervasive at every level of society. It is possible to argue that the way women are depicted in the game, often as sex workers or nagging, unsympathetic figures, reflects how women are perceived in real life. In this reading, the game does not necessarily endorse these portrayals, it holds up a mirror to the objectification and marginalisation of women in American society. However, unlike its critique of capitalism or political corruption, which is often accompanied by irony or absurd exaggeration, such as the over-the-top *Republican Space Rangers* cartoon satirising police brutality, in-game sexism is rarely depicted with the same satiricism. For example, in *GTA V*, the player, through a main character called Trevor, is required to gruesomely torture a man, whom he later sets free at the airport. Trevor was ordered to kill him, but denied it as he does not like taking commands from officials. This emphasises the hypocrisy through satire, but when Trevor violently confronts women like Ashley, his sex partner in *GTA V*, and can murder her, the game offers no ironic framing, making the misogyny feel normalised rather than critiqued.

Moreover, female characters are often depicted as either helpless victims or overly sexualised objects, with little to no agency in the storylines. In *GTA V*, for example, Michael's daughter, Tracey, is depicted as a superficial character, as she is focused primarily on her appearance, which reinforces the stereotype of the promiscuous young woman. She is unemployed but tries to get into show business by auditioning for a reality show, *Fame or Shame*, presented by Lazlow Jones. During the casting, Tracy is dancing suggestively to earn Lazlow's and the other judges' favour, as can be seen in the picture below.



This portrayal reduces her to a sexualised object whose value is defined by her behaviour and physical appearance. Her exaggerated movements, revealing outfit, and the enthusiastic reactions of the male characters frame her not as an agent of her own ambitions, but as a tool for male gratification. Rather than offering a critique of this kind of exploitation, the game seems to replicate it, presenting Tracy's objectification without irony or meaningful commentary. His inappropriate behaviour is met with audience laughter, which trivialises the assault. Her father ends the performance, which suggests that a woman is only treated fairly

when she belongs to a man. The lack of consequences for Lazlow and the tone of the scene show the game's failure to address the serious implications of sexual harassment. This portrayal reinforces the idea that women's bodies are open to ridicule and public consumption. Additionally, the mission to rescue Tracy from public embarrassment does not move the story significantly forward, as her role in the series is purely comedic relief and to portray the stereotypical rich, white, middle-class American girl. Her character lacks depth and variety, as do the few other female characters in the series.

Similarly, as discussed before, Michael's wife, Amanda, is shown to be unfaithful, as she is having an affair with her yoga instructor. This perpetuates the stereotype of the disloyal, deceitful wife. These portrayals reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to a culture where women are objectified and seen as secondary to men.

#### *2.4 Sound and Symbols in GTA V*

In *Grand Theft Auto V*, gender is not just shaped by characters or missions, it is built into the background through voices and advertisements that subtly push stereotypical ideas about men and women. One of the ways the game conveys gender roles is through sound design. Female pedestrians often speak in high-pitched or exaggerated tones, especially when reacting to violence or danger, reinforcing a portrayal of women as emotionally reactive and vulnerable. Their dialogue frequently revolves around appearance, consumerism, or relationships. In *GTA V*, for instance, a female character says, "I'm rich. My life is perfect. I live in a palace, and I hate myself." In contrast, male NPCs are more likely to speak confidently or aggressively, often referencing money or violence, though not exclusively. These differences contribute to a sonic landscape in which women are cast as background figures, while men are positioned as the dominant actors within the world. Even in random

street chatter, the game reinforces a gendered hierarchy, making women's roles more passive and aesthetic, and men's more active and powerful.

The world of GTA V is also filled with fictional brands and advertisements, many of which poke fun at real consumer culture, but these ads also often rely on depicting traditional gender roles to get their message across. An example of this is the "Manhood" billboard for the in-game car company Benefactor. The advertisement implies that owning a luxury car is central to a man's identity and social status, which suggests that masculinity can be measured by the expense and speed of the vehicle he possesses.



However, these ads frequently depict women as prizes, accessories, or symbols of success. One advertisement for a cosmetic surgery clinic illustrates a woman's body being "perfected," implying that female worth is determined by how closely they can conform to a beauty ideal. While the game's satire may target consumerism, it still relies heavily on stereotypes, particularly regarding femininity. Women are often portrayed not as leaders or workers, but rather as consumers or mere background elements.

This is further emphasised in the billboard for a makeup company, seemingly mocking women who wear heavier makeup, by featuring a woman whose makeup does not match her skin tone. The slogan “PAINT IT ON” ridicules women for attempting to enhance their appearance.



Another ad features a slogan reading “When you marry a slut... Ignorance is Bliss”, promoting an in-game TV show called *"Ignorance is Bliss"*. The ad features a muscular, aggressive-looking man embracing a distressed woman, while another man is depicted hiding under the couch behind them, suggesting that the woman is unfaithful and that the husband is better off not knowing, as she might abuse his wife.



This billboard also plays into harmful gender stereotypes, and reduces the woman to a sexual object and positions male insecurity and possessiveness as comedic. These ads, scattered across the game's open world, create an atmosphere where women's roles are mostly decorative or sexual. They don't exist as full characters with goals or agency.

### 3. Gameplay Mechanics

#### 3.1 Misogyny as a Gameplay Mechanic

*Grand Theft Auto* constructs a virtual world where violence against women is normalised and often rewarded, which reinforces harmful stereotypes and desensitises players to misogynistic behaviour. Misogyny in the game is not just a background element but an integral part of its mechanics, demonstrating how the gaming industry and particularly *GTA* embeds gendered violence into its entertainment. Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric is useful in understanding how *GTA* uses misogyny as a gameplay mechanic. Bogost writes in the book *Persuasive Games, A Decade Later*, that procedural rhetoric is "the idea that games and software can make arguments through their mechanics." (29). In the context of *GTA*, players learn through gameplay that violence, control, and male dominance are effective strategies for success. When players are rewarded for exploiting or dismissing female characters, the game reinforces these values not only through story but through player action.

The concept of the magic circle, introduced by Johan Huizinga, is essential for understanding the gameplay experience in the *Grand Theft Auto* series. As Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. explain, the magic circle refers to the boundary that separates the game world from reality, allowing players to engage in morally and ethically challenging scenarios without real-world consequences. (34) However, in the context of *GTA*, this boundary often becomes blurred. The portrayal of women and the embedded antifeminist themes in the game can influence players' perceptions, which can extend beyond the virtual world. It can be assumed that players mimic these harmful behaviours, as they are likely to associate themselves with the character, therefore, they are likely to adopt antifeminist themes into their lives. Players often choose the character that aligns with their own gender, as it resonates with them better.

Sharon R. Sherman, who researched gender and genre in video games, asked her study's participants about which character in *Mario* they chose to play with. She wrote: "Every girl I asked responded instantly that she played the princess in this sequel. Boys, on the other hand, play Luigi or Toadstool." (253) Therefore, players see themselves in the characters, and involuntarily align with them.

Furthermore, *GTA's* depiction of traditional gender roles and hypermasculinity encourages players to be aggressive, dominant, and dismissive of women. As players identify and empathise with the character they control, they may be more likely to mimic these behaviours in real life. Moreover, players have limited agency in how they interact with female characters, as they are often forced to objectify or exploit them in order to progress in the game. Many of the interactions with women in *GTA* are scripted in ways that reinforce misogynistic attitudes, leaving players to engage in dismissive or abusive behaviour. In *GTA V*, Trevor abducts Patricia Madrazo, the wife of a Mexican cartel leader, as retaliation for not receiving payment after murdering his cousin for him. While Patricia later appears to reciprocate Trevor's affections, this does not change the fact that she was initially treated as leverage in a violent conflict between men.

Similarly, *GTA IV's* protagonist, Niko Bellic, has limited options when engaging with women, as most of his interactions revolve around transactional relationships, such as transporting sex workers or dating women to gain special abilities which help progress in the game. Niko's romantic relationships further reinforce the game's misogynistic dynamics, as his girlfriends solely exist to serve his needs rather than being fully developed characters with their own agency. The women Niko dates function as tools to aid him and to provide him with in-game benefits for his missions, such as health boosts, removing wanted labels (representing the degree of police attention a player has attracted due to their in-game

actions) and store discounts, reducing their significance to their utility in his criminal endeavors. Additionally, the success of these relationships is influenced by superficial factors, such as the car Niko drives and the clothes he wears when picking them up for dates. This mechanic reinforces the stereotype that women are primarily concerned with wealth, suggesting that their interest in men is solely transactional rather than genuine. The game encourages players to manipulate these women's affections by appealing to materialistic desires, which reinforces sexist assumptions about female behaviour.

### 3.2 Exclusively Male Protagonists in *GTA* Games Exploring Masculinity

The Grand Theft Auto series' focus on male protagonists reflects a narrow exploration of masculinity, but the planned inclusion of a female protagonist suggests a potential shift toward more diverse and inclusive storytelling. Thus far, the *Grand Theft Auto* series has exclusively featured male protagonists, which is a decision that reflects and reinforces the franchise's deeply embedded gender bias. The developer, Dan Houser, has explained that this choice is tied to the themes of the stories. Narratives like *GTA V* were deeply rooted in exploring masculinity, which was a focus he felt was best represented through male lead characters. He explained that "The concept of being masculine was so key to this story". However, masculinity is not synonymous with violence, aggression, or criminality, as Dan Houser implied.

The portrayal of masculinity in *GTA V* through the three protagonists, Michael, Franklin, and Trevor, is indeed central, but it is also exaggerated and often grotesque. Each character embodies a form of hypermasculinity. Michael is a patriarch trying to reclaim control over a family that no longer respects him, Franklin is the ambitious hustler trying to prove himself, and Trevor is objectively the embodiment of violence and misogyny. These representations and the game itself are framed as critiques of the American Dream, yet the

game frequently blurs the line between satire and glorification. The protagonists are given complex backstories, emotional depth, and moral dilemmas, traits that are rarely given to female characters. However, by associating masculinity so tightly and synonymously with violence, criminality, and emotional suppression, *GTA V* ends up reinforcing, rather than interrogating, stereotypical gender norms.

Moreover, Houser's statement also suggests that female characters cannot participate meaningfully in narratives centred on power, conflict, or identity. This is not only a creative limitation but also a reinforcement of outdated gender roles. The notion that only men can engage in illicit activities like bank robbery and high-speed chases overlooks the reality that women are also capable of participating in both criminal and heroic actions within and outside of the gaming world. There are real-world examples of female involvement in organised crime, such as Virginia Hill and Griselda Blanco, that demonstrate that women have occupied roles of power in criminal endeavours. Furthermore, in the gaming world, video games like *Tomb Raider* and *The Last of Us Part II* have shown that female characters can successfully lead narratives that include combat, violence, and emotional complexity without relying on outdated tropes. In contrast, *GTA* has lagged behind regarding this, as they have thus far clung to an all-male protagonist roster that suggested a reluctance to inclusivity.

Nevertheless, there is confirmation that Rockstar Games is reconsidering its approach, as the company has confirmed the introduction of a female protagonist in the upcoming instalment of the series, *GTA VI*. It was teased in the recently released trailer, which, while suggesting progress, still features several female stereotypes such as overly sexualised women and background characters framed through the male gaze.

## Player Agency

### 4.1 Gendered Violence

The game's open-world structure allows players to engage in a variety of criminal activities, including violence and exploitation, which often target female characters. These actions are typically presented as part of the game's humour, thus downplaying the serious consequences of such behaviour in the real world. The normalisation of such violence and objectification through gameplay can have a significant impact on players' attitudes toward women, blurring the lines between virtual and real-world consequences.

Violence in the game is a defining feature, as the series is notorious for its depiction of graphic violence, from physical confrontations to drive-by shootings. In *GTA*, players are encouraged to engage in violent actions, often as a means of advancing in the game or gaining rewards. Players can participate in a variety of violent acts such as robberies, gang wars, and confrontations with law enforcement. The representation of violence in *GTA* extends beyond its gameplay and seeps into the real world, which is illustrated by Jacob Saenz's poem *GTA: San Andreas (or, 'Grove Street, Bitch!')*. The poem conveys the presence of violence in the game with lines like, "In the streets, never leave/home w/out my 9mm./On the avenue, always carry/my pen & wine key, in case/some fool blows his cork./My uzi sings songs in/the streets - rat-a-tat-tat" and "I'll punch punks purple & blue/in the streets, bleed 'em w/bullets./On the avenue, I'll leave punching" (162). These lines reflect the violence present in the game and demonstrate the normalcy of violence in the world of *GTA*, where it becomes a routine aspect of daily life.

This culture of violence is further amplified in *GTA Online*, in which players are encouraged to perpetuate these actions in a multiplayer setting, including organised crime, street wars, and general aggression. A specific example of violence against women in *GTA* is

when players kill strippers after engaging with them in sexual acts, and they drop the money that was handed to them as payment for their services. This reinforces the game's emphasis on violence and objectification. This mechanic not only trivialises the lives of female characters but also perpetuates the notion that women, particularly those in marginalised roles, can be exploited for financial gain, which further highlights the game's tendency to associate female characters with sexualised roles, thus reducing them to rewards for violent behaviour. This objectification extends beyond the virtual world; as Barker and Jurasz point out, "At the same time, women who participate in these online fora face various forms of violence—predominantly text-based—including online misogyny" (95). It shows that the way women are treated in the game often carries over into the real world, where female players face similar kinds of mistreatment online, from harassment to being pushed out of spaces.

#### *4.2 Women's Agency in Sandbox and Role-Playing Games*

While there has been a rise in so-called "girl power" games that centre female protagonists, these titles are rarely sandbox or open-world games, and often provide players with more restricted agency compared to their male-led counterparts. Games like the aforementioned *Tomb Raider* or *The Last of Us II* offer limited exploration of the game's world, linear objectives, and they focus heavily on appearance or nurturing roles, which are traits traditionally associated with femininity. Lara Croft, the protagonist of the *Tomb Raider* series, has frequently been sexualised through camera angles that linger on her body, reinforcing the male gaze even as she is presented as an empowered heroine. Similarly, in *The Last of Us*, Ellie initially functions more as a supporting, nurturing figure to Joel despite her narrative importance. In contrast, sandbox games such as *Grand Theft Auto* give players expansive worlds to explore, moral freedom and opportunities to express violence, traits that are

typically viewed as masculine. This dichotomy suggests that developers may unconsciously or otherwise design female-led games within more controlled environments, which reflects outdated beliefs about what female players want or what roles women should hold in interactive narratives. The ability to play as a female character in an open-world setting is usually found in role-playing games, where players can create and customise their avatars. Titles like *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Hogwarts Legacy* allow players to choose their character's gender and appearance, which offers flexibility in the protagonist's looks, which is often absent in narrative-driven sandbox games with fixed protagonists. This design choice suggests that when women are playable characters, their presence is often the result of optional player choice rather than a deliberate narrative focus.

In *GTA Online*, players can also create and play as female avatars, participating in missions, heists, and custom scenarios alongside male characters. This is a departure from the main series' tendency to feature only male protagonists. This design choice created a space where female representation is more visible, although in this way the game is player-driven rather than narrative-driven, thus the representation does not come from the game itself, but from the players. The rise of roleplay servers on platforms like Twitch has allowed female players to represent themselves and has brought attention to diverse female characters in *GTA Online*, whilst shaping their own narratives and building large communities around their personas. Despite this increased visibility, female avatars in *GTA Online* are still subjected to many of the same aesthetic limitations and hypersexualised clothing options found elsewhere in the series. Moreover, female players often report facing in-game harassment or being underestimated by others in multiplayer settings, highlighting that representation in character options doesn't always equate to inclusivity in experience. A survey reported by *The Guardian* revealed that 49% of British female gamers have suffered abuse online, with the figure rising to 75% among those aged 18-24. (Marsh)

A possible theory behind this divide is that open-world games are still perceived as spaces that must prioritise freedom, aggression, and chaos, which are qualities of masculine power fantasies. *GTA* exemplifies this dynamic by offering players an open-world playground centred on violence and criminality. Its exclusion of female protagonists reflects the genre's tendency to associate main characters and storylines with traditionally masculine behaviours. Consequently, female protagonists are less often imagined as fitting within these systems, which leads to their underrepresentation in sandbox games. When women do appear in open-world games, they are often secondary characters, love interests, or optional avatars whose narratives are not as deeply integrated as those of their male counterparts.

#### *4.2 Female Characters' Roles*

In the *Grand Theft Auto series*, female characters are consistently portrayed through reductive and stereotypical views, primarily as sexualised objects, background figures, or sources of ridicule, which reflects the misogyny within the game's narrative structure. Rather than offering critical commentary on gender dynamics, the game reinforces existing societal hierarchies by marginalising women's roles and denying them complexity, autonomy, or narrative agency. Across the franchise, female characters are overwhelmingly depicted as strippers, prostitutes, nagging wives, or disposable side characters. These archetypes diminish women's representation and indicate their dispensability. For example, in *GTA: San Andreas*, the few female characters that are named, such as Denise Robinson or Millie Perkins, serve primarily as girlfriends to the protagonist, Carl Johnson. Their inclusion in the storyline is tokenistic, revolving around Johnson's progress rather than their own development. They exist to provide romantic or sexual side stories for the male protagonist, reinforcing the idea that women's value lies in their relationship to male characters.

This issue is particularly evident in *GTA V* through the character of Tonya Wiggins, a Black woman introduced during the side mission “Pulling Favors.” Tonya gives Franklin the task of towing cars in place of her absent partner, temporarily placing her in the role of a quest giver. This exemplifies the game’s tendency to confine women to marginalised, low-status roles. While her role is crucial to the mission, it is not a position typically synonymous with power or authority in the real world. Furthermore, this might seem like a moment of agency, but her portrayal leans heavily into the stereotype of the “sassy, confident Black woman,” a trope often used for comic effect rather than genuine empowerment. Her speech is exaggerated, her tone theatrical, and she is framed more as a parody than as a character with depth. A particularly telling moment occurs when Tonya says, “One, I can’t drive. And two, this ain’t no work for a lady.” to which Franklin sarcastically responds, “Oh, you really fightin’ the feminist cause there, ain’t you, Tonya?” This exchange directly references feminism, but only to mock it, thus it turns the conversation into a joke. Though Tonya briefly holds narrative authority, her role quickly reverts to comic relief, and her presence serves to reinforce stereotypes. As Rhonda Walley-Jean notes, empirical evidence supporting this stereotype is nonexistent (69). Tonya’s depiction reflects *GTA V*’s broader tendency to reference feminist ideas only to undermine them.

Another example of stereotyping is Michael’s wife, Amanda, in *GTA V*, who is frequently mocked and undermined. She is portrayed as lazy, unfaithful, and materialistic, embodying the caricature of the “nagging wife” who spends her husband’s money while offering nothing in return. Rather than being a complex and nuanced character, Amanda exists solely as a foil character to Michael, symbolising his dissatisfaction. Similarly, their daughter Tracey is sexualised, as her ambition to become a reality TV star is ridiculed, and she is constantly viewed through the lens of her sexual desirability rather than her autonomy. These dynamics

reduce female characters to extreme stereotypes and leave no room for nuance or genuine representation.

In contrast, male characters, even those who are similarly flawed or engage in criminal activities, are afforded much more narrative space and moral complexity. Trevor, for example, is a violent, unstable murderer, yet his character is explored with layers of psychological depth, dark humour, and even moments of vulnerability, like when he is rescuing a cartel leader's wife, Patricia in *GTA V*. This depth is almost entirely absent from female characters, who are rarely given meaningful story arcs of their own. These representations mirror and reinforce real-world power dynamics by consistently sidelining female characters and presenting them as either comedic relief or sexual objects. While it can be argued that Amanda is not a main character, and that is why her depiction is not as nuanced, she is not a disposable side character either. There are many scenes where players can observe her personality, and where developers could have made her a morally grey character like Trevor.

Furthermore, while this thesis primarily explores misogyny and the stereotypical portrayal of women in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, it is worth briefly considering the depiction of male characters' roles and the frequent use of violence against them. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of in-game violence is directed at male characters, who are often portrayed as gang members, corrupt officials, or otherwise disposable figures within the game's criminal underworld. This recurring imagery can be viewed through Warren Farrell's argument in *The Myth of Male Power*, where he claims that men are often treated as the "disposable sex," valued more for their utility than their humanity. (253) In the *GTA* universe, male characters are frequently positioned as targets or tools for gameplay progression, rather than fully developed individuals. However, this does not inherently contradict the series'

antifeminist undertones. At the same time, the fact that women are largely absent from the game's main action, and instead show up in background roles like strippers, pedestrians, or plot devices, only makes their marginalisation more obvious. While men are usually the ones being killed, at least they're part of the action. Women, on the other hand, are rarely given enough narrative importance to even be involved, except when they serve a sexual function. Although *GTA* often treats male characters as expendable, that does not make the portrayal of women any better.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, misogyny and antifeminism in the *Grand Theft Auto* series are not just incidental or reflective of cultural attitudes but are actively embedded within the game's mechanics, narratives, and player interactions. The series constructs a world where women are frequently sidelined, objectified, or used as props for male storylines, while male characters are given complexity and agency. Through its portrayal of women as objects for male gratification, its reinforcement of materialistic stereotypes, and its encouragement of violent or dismissive behavior toward female characters, *GTA* perpetuates problematic gender norms under the guise of satire and entertainment. Through its reinforcement of gender stereotypes, exaggerated portrayals of hypermasculinity, and its treatment of violence against women as both background detail and player entertainment, *GTA* fosters an environment that amplifies the gender biases present in real-world society.

While some defend *GTA* as satire, a critique of American culture, its handling of misogynistic tropes often lacks the self-awareness or irony needed to qualify as a social commentary. Unlike its over-the-top treatment of political corruption or capitalist absurdities, female characters are passive victims or punchlines rather than agents of their own stories. Even when feminism is referenced, such as in the interaction between Tonya and Franklin, it is used as a joke, further trivialising gender issues rather than engaging with them critically.

Moreover, the marginalisation of women extends beyond the narrative into the player's experience, as limited interactivity with female characters, sexualised customisation options, and the broader gaming community's frequent hostility toward women all reinforce the sense that female presence in these worlds is conditional and performative.

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