Stealing Cars: Technology and Society from the Model T to the Gran Torino

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The Recent Past

I have discovered you have to work twice as hard when it's honest.

SARA "SWAY" WAYLAND (ANGELINA JOLIE), GONE IN SIXTY SECONDS (2000)

In the closing scenes of Clint Eastwood's 2008 film Gran Torino, the stories of one man's personal redemption and another's dream of achieving independent manhood come together in two life-defining moments: one of self-sacrifice, and the other a symbolic act of automobility. Confronting a gang that had terrorized his newly adopted family of immigrant Hmong neighbors, the cantankerous Polish-American autoworker and Korean War veteran Walt goads the thugs into murdering him before witnesses and thereby saves the community. By his death, Walt spares the life and ensures the innocence of Thao, the neighbor boy who was intent on exacting revenge for the rape of his sister by the gang. For Walt, the thought of the good he is doing may ease the haunting memory of his killing of an enemy prisoner in Korea. Thao is his last chance at redemption. Thao, whom Walt had guided in the previous months into self-respecting appreciation of hard work, independence of mind, and success with the ladies, is last seen driving Walt's beloved Gran Torino toward what must be presumed to be a future life of dignified manhood. This story of tragic nobility takes place in the "motor city"—Detroit, Michigan (more specifically, Highland Park, where Ford Model T's were first built). And the story begins with an attempted theft by Thao of Walt's Gran Torino.

The car featured in the film—a Ford Gran Torino SportsRoof—was a vestige of the glory once associated with "Detroit Iron." The green muscle car featured body-on-frame construction rather than a cheaper unibody design, along with a long hood that had a scoop and a short
deck. Most commentators of the day thought the car looked good, and interestingly, it handled far better than its competition.

What is the essential significance of Walt’s Gran Torino? On one level, the car was a catalyst for what followed, and nothing more. But the type of car, a 1972 Gran Torino—American muscle made at the end of the nation’s love affair with the car—was the last thing of loving importance in Walt’s undistinguished working-class life. Walt had just lost his wife, and his family was totally disaffected toward him. His neighborhood was no more—he was one of the last white Americans living in it, the others all having fled. Walt’s car, still looking like new, represented a world long gone, one on which we look back with nostalgia. Thus, the Gran Torino signifies dignified independence, covered in a garage, while Walt uses a rusty old truck as his daily driver. And why would one drive the Ford in a world gone wrong? Walt is waiting for a worthy new owner, certainly not from his own family. It is Thao, whose independent actions result in his becoming a true American, who is now worthy of getting behind the wheel of this American classic. And while this story illustrates the connection between auto theft and the muscular American male, in more recent times the act of auto theft has been increasingly associated with the intelligent and technologically adept male as well.

**BETTER TECHNOLOGY, SMARTER THIEVES**

In 2010 John R. Quain, writing in the *New York Times*, summarized recent developments in auto-theft technology this way: “Technology is getting better[,] professional car thieves have stepped up their game, too, meaning that some tracking systems may be better than others.”

Without question, technology has had an impact on the decline of theft rates experienced since 2005. And while the joyrider is nearly extinct, professionals continue to thrive, as current recovery rates are at the alarmingly low level of less than 50 percent. Since September 11, 2001, the United States has concentrated its border efforts far more on what comes into the country than on what might go out. Consequently, with law enforcement and customs officials stretched thin,
Ethnic gangs flourish in the hot-car export markets. Coupled with a high level of insurance-fraud activities and vehicle cloning rings, they give authorities—hampered by personnel and funding cutbacks—more than they can handle.

One deterrent has been General Motors’s OnStar, installed in a growing number of vehicles. OnStar is mainly known as a motorist response system for emergencies or accidents. But it also has its own vehicle-recovery program, in which the victim of a car theft calls the authorities and OnStar. Control-center personnel at OnStar then send out a radio wave that can disable the car by preventing its ignition from starting, or it can energize the car’s lights to flash and its horn to honk. OnStar personnel can remotely make the vehicle come to a gentle stop if it is already in motion, thus avoiding a potentially dangerous police chase. But OnStar has its flaws. For example, during the time lapse before the owner of the boosted vehicle reports the car as missing, thieves may be able to either strip it or simply disable the equipment. The Internet is also full of advice, some probably good, some bad, on how one might defeat the OnStar system. One website instructs a would-be thief to find the unit under the front passenger seat and then unplug terminals J1, J2, and J3, while keeping J4 connected to the unit. A so-called expert posted the following: “See that little black rectangular box at the right center top of the windshield? Find the feed wire to it, [then] use a small wire clipper to ‘interrupt’ communications. Permanently.” For all units that depend on GPS, just putting the car into an enclosed space serves to shield the unit from a satellite transmission. But if one wishes to use a more elegant technological approach, the GPS Jammer may be the tool of choice. The Jammer 08, available from a Chinese company for $150 on the Internet, prevents cars and the people in them from being tracked. Its makers claim: “It adopts the technology of interdiction and interposition code, so it will intercept the signal of satellite and break it completely.”

Thieves can counter even some of the most sophisticated new antitheft technology devices. For instance, the SD-98 device serves as a remote-control unit that can be manipulated to defeat keyless door locks. Essentially, it mimics one’s keyless door opener. By activating a master remote control to operate a television or a DVD player, the
Remote alarm system, 1996. Alarm systems have evolved continuously since the 1930s. Early designs usually featured a device that responded to the bumping or shocking of a vehicle; as they became more sophisticated, hood, trunk, and door switches were connected to a central unit or "brain" that disabled the starter. Ricky Samford patented this remotely activated unit, which featured a radio transmitter and receiver that could cut off the flow of fuel to the engine.

SD-98 auto remote-control blocker works on 868, 433, 315, 305, and 330 MHz. It has four functions—scanning, blocking, jamming, and also operating if the manufacturer's code is known, much like the device it is attempting to replace. It scans for antitheft-device frequencies; when it finds one, it opens a vehicle door without destroying the lock. It also can block a remote-control signal, if there is a key sending such a signal, and then open the car. It can also jam or disable a car key. And finally, if the thief has a manufacturer's code, it opens the door directly. The code works on Audi, Alfa, BMW, Bentley, Mercedes-Benz, Citroën, Fiat, General Motors, Honda, Jaguar, Mazda, Volkswagen, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Peugeot, Renault, Seat, Skoda, and Toyota, up to the model year 2010. And despite the relative effectiveness of the LoJack and the claim that its strong radio signal is difficult to jam, a Chinese company currently markets a "LoJack Jammer." Features of the RMX02 LoJack
4G XM Jammer include disabling the LoJack tracker. The device operates at a range of 5 to 15 meters and is able to produce untraceable RF signals.

**WHO CARES?**

More recent film and literature lionized the auto thief in a manner that painted the act as largely victimless, harmless to human health, and at times actually comedic. The 2007 independent film *The Go-Getter* paints a picture of West Coast kids living aimlessly and in angst. High school senior Mercer (Lou Taylor Pucci), who recently witnessed the death of his mother, has just read Mark Twain in an AP English class and wants to journey on "the river." Impulsively, he steals a 240 Volvo station wagon at a car wash in his small Oregon town and begins an odyssey to find his half brother, Arlen. Along the way, he discovers that his brother is a no-good and that humans generally are disappointing. There is one exception, however. The owner of the car, Kate (Zooey Deschanel), has left her cell phone in the car, and she begins to have an extended conversation with the young thief. From time to time, she calls Mercer. Ultimately, her empathy with him results in a profound relationship that bonds Mercer with the stolen vehicle’s owner. She raises an important question: is “life random or fate?” Was Mercer’s theft of the Volvo a totally random act, or was there a deeper meaning behind this crime? Mercer’s trip takes him (and for a time a girl living in Fallon, Nevada, whom he once knew in middle school) through such places as Shelter Cove, California; Reno, Nevada; the Mohave Desert; Los Angeles; and finally, Ensenada, Mexico, where he catches up with his half brother and realizes Kate’s love. Mercer’s next stop is Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, where an aunt and two cousins live, but this time Kate rides along for the drive. In sum, the film reflects a generation’s fears and challenges, and the stolen car is a mere conveyance. The old Volvo is nothing more than an appliance, so typical of the way the postmillennial generation views automobiles in general.

In recent fiction also, moral relativity related to auto theft appears to be the “new normal.” Janet Evanovich’s *Motor Mouth* is an entertaining
but forgettable story of sex, cheating on the NASCAR circuit, theft, and
the detection of a microchip that is at the heart of a high-tech traction-
control system. After a race is lost under suspicious circumstances, the
central character in the novel, Barnaby, a woman mechanic who loves
pink and was once the lover of driver Hooker, decides that something
was not right with the winning car and perpetrates a boost of a hauler
with two cars—and, incidentally, a dead body packed in ice. But a GPS
system has to be disabled, and Barnaby does that rather simply: “I was
able to squeeze my arm far enough to reach a ball of aluminum foil
sitting on the kitchenette counter. I ripped a couple of chunks off the
roll, swung out of the hauler, and climbed onto the back to the cab. The
antenna had been placed in the usual location between the exhaust
pipes. I wrapped the antenna in aluminum foil and jumped off. Turns
out it’s pretty easy to screw up a GPS system.” With that clever act, the
hauler and the race car are stolen, and the puzzle of why a competitor’s
car turned out to be so fast is ultimately solved. While the theft is
central to the story, it merely enables the author to develop characters
with postmillennium moral values.

Finally, Pete Hautman’s *How to Steal a Car*, published by Scholastic
Press in 2009, was aimed directly at teenagers. The back of the dust
cover says it all:

Are you bored out of your mind?
Sick of your friends and family?
Wish you were somewhere (anywhere) else?
Stealing a car might help.11

Written about teenagers for a teenage audience, *How to Steal a Car*
is a tale of a fifteen-year-old girl, her friends and schoolmates,
and her dysfunctional family. But this is not just any fifteen-year-old
girl, for Kell, the novel’s protagonist, is a thoroughly middle-class nerd
who reads *Moby-Dick* and steals cars. At first it is just impulsive, and
then her activities move into the sphere of an organized car-theft ring.
As the author interjects, “Most people think car thieves are squinty-
eyed young guys with tattoos and grease under their finger-nails, but
you never know who will steal a car.”12 Kell lives in a world with few
absolute moral standards, little compunction about breaking the law when no one is visibly hurt, and a fiercely independent streak also found in her parents and grandparents. Her conscience rarely bothers her; she relates, “I should say something about my mental state during all of this: Happy and Relaxed.” Since she is fifteen, she knows the law will come down easy on her when she’s caught, if it does at all, and thus fears little concerning any consequences. As the novel ends, Kell concludes: “I think a lot of car thieves just like to steal cars and drive. Also, they think they will never get caught even though most of them eventually do and they know it but they just don’t care.”

Contemporary film revealed the youthfulness and societal complexities that were often involved in auto thievery. At times the act was casual and a spur-of-the-moment thing; other times it was part of a calculated plan to steal expensive cars for monetary rewards. For the most desperate, it was either a break from boredom or part of a survival strategy. And with few exceptions, simplistic story lines did little to dig deep into personalities or motives.

**CAR THEFT AS A GAME**

Electronic gaming, which in terms of profits had far outstripped film by the early twenty-first century, took auto banditry to far darker and more violent levels. Both forms of media brought the viewer or participant into imaginary worlds of entertainment, but electronic gaming was far more intense, emotional, and controversial.

In 1997 car theft entered the digital world in a significant way with the introduction of *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) video games. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, *GTA* was the best-selling and among the most technologically sophisticated games in the competitive videogame industry. “In its ambition, fearlessness, style, and production quality,” one reviewer wrote in 2009, “it stands apart from every other franchise.” Take-Two Interactive and Rockstar games have sold more than 80 million units of *GTA* and its spin-offs. The action and scope of the digital map, along with driving and gunplay, have given the *GTA* series a strong consumer appeal. Between the introduction of *GTA* I
and the release of GTA III in 2002, Rockstar transformed the games from a structured set of missions with a top-down birds-eye view of the car into a nonlinear sandbox playground, giving the GTA player the freedom to pursue organized crime or, with weapon and automobile, create mayhem. With GTA III, subsequently refined with the release of GTA IV in 2008, the digital landscape was converted into what the video game world calls a “sandbox” — gamers could, at their discretion, follow GTA’s narrative or could drive their stolen automobile around the open digital city. In this digital world, driving is essential to the player’s criminal success, and car theft becomes a necessary prelude to other criminal tasks. To complete GTA’s narrative, the gamer must accomplish a series of criminal underworld missions. In San Andreas, for example, to complete the mission “Life’s a Beach,” the player must win a dance contest and then steal the “Sound Van” from a local DJ and successfully transport it to a local parking garage. The virtual universe of GTA’s “urban action” game revolutionized the video game industry. Importantly, automobile theft and automobile-related violence is, in almost all sequences, the pivotal and most thrilling dimension of the GTA experience. With GTA, car thieves became one of the most popular avatars in the video game industry. Unlike games with hero-avatars who eliminate bad guys for a self-proclaimed righteous cause, the GTA player controls criminal-avatars who carry out illegal tasks or, if the player chooses, commit random violence on innocent bystanders and pedestrians. Players assume the criminal’s identity; they see the game’s digital world through his eyes. The digital criminals can—at the player’s discretion—assume one of the automobile thief’s many personas: the youthful joyrider, the professional thief, the carjacker, the reckless escapist, the drive-by shooter, the placid cruiser, or the savvy criminal who, in a stolen car, commits murders, deals drugs, or kidnaps.

Each version of GTA has a particular criminal ethos, intimately connected to automobile theft. Vice City (2002) is set in a fictional Miami, and the criminal-avatar is a Tony Montanya-like Italian American ma-fioso named Tommy Vercetti; San Andreas (2004) is set in a West Coast city, and the avatar-criminal is an African American gangsta named Carl Johnson, modeled on a character from the 1991 movie Boyz N the Hood; GTA IV’s Liberty City (2008) is a replica of New York, and
the digital lawbreaker is eastern European immigrant Niko Bellic—a *Godfather* prototype. What the gamer does with the stolen automobile is a matter of choice, but violence and chaos seem unavoidable. As in real life, the automobile is itself a weapon, a force for violence and destruction. Digital cars, set aflame by assault rifle fire or Molotov cocktail, explode with drivers still inside; pedestrians are run over—some bounce off the car’s grill, others fly over the hood. When a driver hits a random motorcyclist, however, the resulting crash is particularly catastrophic: the motorcyclist is sent flying long and high distances before death à la cement trauma. It’s also important to note that in *GTA* the automobile can serve more banal and logistical purposes: it can be used to go to a fast food joint, to have sex with a prostitute, or to complete illegal errands. In *GTA* the automobile serves many purposes, but theft, violence, crime, and destruction are at the heart of the game’s digital automobility.

Stealing a car in *GTA*’s digital world is a discommodious combination of reality and fantasy. Car theft in *GTA* is undemanding and nearly always without consequence. With a player’s click of a console button, the thief-avatar casually opens the door to an unmanned car or tosses the driver out of an already occupied car and motors away. Unencumbered by drivers, locks, the Club, alarms, OnStar, security cameras, or any other theft-prevention system, automobile theft in *GTA* is effortlessly accomplished. The thief’s deed therefore becomes an everyday activity. “You will,” as one reviewer counseled, “steal thousands of cars in the course of the game, driving each until you have destroyed it or until you see one you like better.”

The automobile is strangely disposable in this world, and the thief is incorrigible. Even if the car thief were apprehended, he faces no court system and no prison time: the criminal-avatar, whether arrested or killed, regenerates in a designated place on the digital map. The digital map, the more authentic component of *GTA*, is an immense and open-ended arena built to mirror major American cities. The thief-avatar navigates the freeways, manufacturing districts, slums, and urban neighborhoods of a faux New York or Los Angeles in a range of digital car makes and models that mimic the models on the streets. In *Vice City Stories* you can steal the *Patriot* (Hummer), in *San Andreas* you
can steal the *Elegant* (BMW), and in *GTA IV* you can steal the *Infernus* (Lamborghini). Also at the gamer's disposal are motorcycles, tractors, forklifts, trucks, buses, helicopters, and airplanes. The stolen cars and other vehicles perform, in some crucial respects, like cars on the street. The digital cars leave skid marks on the road after a sharp turn; they incur broken windows and lose fenders in accidents; and car radios play stations with commercials and popular music. The incredible details of the game, coupled with the freedom made possible with the ease of car theft, make *GTA* a digital terrain of geographic reality and mayhem-based fantasy.

In the decade or so after the release of *GTA III* in 2002, the games have been a lightning rod for controversy, centering on real-world violence. In 2002, two teens and a man in his twenties from Grand Rapids, Michigan, spent a night drinking beer and running down digital pedestrians with stolen automobiles while playing *GTA III* and then went out on a real drive and ran down a thirty-eight-year-old man on a bicycle, stomped on him and punched him, and finally returned home to play the game. The automobile, whether used as a weapon or as the innocent victim's conveyance, was the fulcrum of violence in real-world *GTA* incidents. *GTA* automobile theft entered reality when in 2003 Devin Moore, eighteen years old at the time and inspired by *Vice City*, killed three men in a police precinct and then, in classic *GTA* fashion, fled the scene in a stolen squad car.

Some politicians, fearing the effects of *GTA* on children, reacted to the seemingly *GTA*-inspired murder sprees by calling for a new video-game rating system that would prevent adolescents from purchasing the game. The adolescent mind, reform legislators argued, was not able to separate reality from fantasy. In 2002 Joe Baca, a Democrat from southern California, introduced the Protect Children from Video Game Sex and Violence Act of 2002, asking legislators, "Do you really want your kids assuming the role of a mass murderer or a carjacker while you are away at work?" A game of mayhem intended for adults' enjoyment, it seemed, often ended up in the hands of adolescents. *GTA*, they believed, threatened the mental health of American children. In a *Today Show* interview in 2004, famous activist-lawyer Jack Thompson called *GTA* a "murder and carjacking simulator." Critics
like Thompson also cite the sexualized aspect of GTA: the ability of the criminal-avatar, in a stolen car, to have sex with digital prostitutes. Critics were handed a smoking gun in 2005 when a secret sex scene, dubbed “Hot Coffee,” was discovered in GTA: San Andreas. The code allowed the clothed CJ, after courtship, to have sex with a naked female-avatar. That year, New York senator Hillary Clinton launched a campaign on the national level to change GTA’s rating from M (Mature) to AO (Adults Only), with hopes that parents could more effectively protect their children.  

Clinton, singling out GTA as the nation’s most dangerous game, told the Kaiser Family Foundation that video games were a public health issue. “It is a little frustrating,” she said, “when we have this data that demonstrates there is a clear public health connection between exposure to violence [in video games] and increased aggression that we have been as a society unable to come up with any adequate public response.” Despite the criticism from politicians and lawyers, GTA continued to sell hundreds of thousands of copies at fifty to sixty dollars a unit—a considerable percentage of them probably purchased by adolescents. Advocates for GTA, while admitting that these games were not intended for children, contended that the majority of gamers are adult men in their twenties and thirties, perfectly capable of separating fantasy and reality. They also pointed out that GTA was appealing because of actual game play and the expansive urban-action environment—not just violence. GTA, a game with automobile theft and automobile-inspired violence at its center, was defended as an adult stress-reliever.

Politicians and the game’s apologists can’t turn to academics, cultural critics, or technologists for straightforward answers because, unsurprisingly, they too disagree on the meaning of GTA. Journalist Steve Johnson and University of Wisconsin education theorist Paul Gee argue that games like GTA can be effective educational tools and also provide players with alternative social models. Johnson believes that gamers, motivated by rewards, learn how to perform complicated digital tasks—and therefore learn to decide, choose, and prioritize. “It’s not what you’re thinking about when you play the game,” he writes. “It’s the way you’re thinking that matters.” Being a successful digital criminal is an effective learning exercise. Games like GTA
can, for the better, challenge any singular definition of goodness. In a video game’s world, Paul Gee writes, “what counts as being or doing good is determined by a character’s own goals, purposes, or values, as these are shared with a particular social group to which he or she belongs.” The automobile thief and criminal in GTA, therefore, subscribes to the values of his community and acts on them. Performing the tasks necessary to win the game and learning the values of another community, Gee and Johnson believe, are effective pedagogy.

But writer Damon Brown, in his Porn and Pong: How “Grand Theft Auto,” “Tomb Raider,” and Other Sexy Games Changed Our Culture (2008), sees a darker side to the role GTA plays in American culture. The game, he argues, played the crucial role in desensitizing American media to digital porn and violence. Brown believes that in the past twenty years, video games went from mirroring popular culture to setting important cultural trends; GTA—with the Hot Coffee incident and high-volume sales even in the face of severe criticism—was the hinge in this process of cultural transformation. Brown’s argument is provocative, but he supports it with conveniently drawn conclusions. To Brown’s credit, though, numerous scholars make the case that, despite Rockstar’s design of this game as a critique of American violence and commercialism, GTA reinforces and promotes violence, racism, and sexism. In a popular essay, engineer and ethicist Simon Penny argues that video games with gunplay, because they embody aspects of violent game play, teach players to blur reality and simulation. Therefore, games have the “potential to build behaviors that can exist without or separate from, and possibly contrary to, rational argument or ideology.” Penny suggests that games like GTA can train killers. The academic debate, like the political and moral one, is conflicted. But Rockstar continues to sell millions of units of Grand Theft Auto.

THE HACKER AS A CAR THIEF

Electrons are at the core of digital images and contemporary antitheft systems, and they are easily manipulated by those with special knowledge. At the highest intellectual and technical levels of auto thievery
today, the criminals involved can be considered hackers. Since 2005, researchers at Johns Hopkins University, the University of California–San Diego, and the University of Washington have conducted laboratory experiments followed by practical demonstrations that show how easy it is to read Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) key codes and to take over an automobile’s electronic control module without getting inside the car. Despite what both auto manufacturers and insurance companies don’t want car owners to know, thieves do steal cars with RFID keys routinely, especially in Europe, where the technology has been in use for a longer time. The thieves first attach a microreader to a laptop computer. Then they capture radio signals, after positioning the equipment within a few feet of the target (a key if it is an active system, a car if a passive system). The microreader thus intercepts the transmissions sent out by an RFID key transponder, and the computer decrypts the code. Within twenty minutes a key can be made, and the thief is off! With RFID key kits now available because of consumer complaints concerning the cost and difficulty of obtaining replacement keys, the task can be even easier. Insurance companies still claim that the technology is uncrackable and that owners of stolen cars must be committing fraud, but that just places the onus on the consumer, an old strategy, as we have learned.34

In similar fashion, OnStar technology can also be easily defeated, either with a CD containing malware placed in the automobile’s radio console, or outside the vehicle. Once done, the more than fifty computers in the car can be controlled, so that braking and acceleration systems can be taken over. And with the act accomplished, the software can be made to destroy itself, thus removing any evidence of tampering.

These far-reaching technologies have global implications in today’s world of powerful underground drug and terrorist organizations. Their ability to defeat existing security measures requires innovative policing responses that transcend national borders. One indicator of this phenomenon is the rather bizarre instance of stolen American vehicles used as improvised explosive devices in Middle East conflicts.35 With every economic shock, the market for stolen cars gains new currency.