

9-13-2013

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Recommended Citation

"Playing a Thief" (2013). *News Releases*. 377.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/377

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Playing a Thief

09.13.2013 | Faculty, Culture and Society, Hot Topics

As millions of fans await the release of *Grand Theft Auto 5* on Sept. 17, the game remains as controversial as ever for its depiction of crime and violence.

Many have called the video game series the cause — or at least a sign — of a cultural decline in America, but an auto historian and author says society's fascination with car thieves is as old as cars themselves.

"In film, books and legend, the car thief is a mix of villain, ingenious thrill-seeker and sympathetic outlaw," said John Heitmann, University of Dayton history professor. "This fiction often follows reality, which is a cops-and-robbers arms race between theft-prevention technology and sophisticated thieves."

Heitmann is the co-author of *Stealing Cars: Technology and Society from the Model T to the Gran Torino* scheduled for release by Johns Hopkins University Press this coming spring. The book includes a section on the cultural phenomenon of the *Grand Theft Auto* video game series.

"Stealing a car in *Grand Theft Auto's* digital world is a discommodious combination of reality and fantasy," Heitmann writes in the book. "It is undemanding and nearly always without consequence, unencumbered by drivers, locks, The Club, alarms, On Star, security cameras or any other theft prevention system. The automobile is strangely disposable in this world, and the thief is incorrigible."

"The academic debate over the game, like the political and moral one, is conflicted. But Rockstar continues to sell millions of units of *Grand Theft Auto*."

Stealing Cars examines a wide range of related topics that includes motives and methods, technological deterrents, place and space, institutional responses, international borders and cultural reflections. Heitmann and co-author Rebecca H. Morales, former curator of the San Diego Automotive Museum, examine the history of car theft, the cultural and societal response, and how the thief has become as advanced as the cars themselves.

"Many people are fascinated by aspects of automobile history, but many more enjoy the topic of crime, in terms of motives, methods, escaping capture and of course solving the crime and bringing criminals to justice," Heitmann said.

Drawing on sources that include interviews, government documents, patents, sociological and psychological studies, magazines, monographs, scholarly periodicals, film, fiction, and digital gaming, Heitmann and Morales tell a story that highlights both human creativity and some of the paradoxes of American life.

Heitmann is also the author of *The Automobile and American Life* (2009), which looks at how the automobile transformed the American economy, arts, community life, the law and other aspects of American culture. Visit his blog at the related link.

(Photo credit: Tamahikari Tammam, Flickr Photostream)

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