

A Virtual Escape for Rikers Inmates

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The New York jail complex uses video games as part of its strategy to reduce violence with programming for good behavior.

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Talik Thomas spent three days trying to solve a puzzle in the survival horror game Daymare: 1998. In addition to its zombies are the devilishly hard puzzles, one of which requires properly flipping a sequence of switches. It is tricky for a lot of players: Tens of thousands of people have viewed YouTube videos created to help them find the solution.

But inside Rikers Island, the New York jail complex where Mr. Thomas was being held on gun charges, the internet is not freely available. He could not ask Google for help. Instead, he pulled out a notebook to scribble down possible sequences.

“Games like that I do enjoy, because in here, it helps pass the time,” Mr. Thomas, 22, said in an interview at Rikers. “You’re thinking actively, going through different scenarios.”

Video game stations are available in the PEACE Center on Rikers Island, which also houses programs like driver’s ed, a horticulture classroom, a gym and a computer lab.

Video games may seem inconsequential in a place with a reputation for dangerous conditions and inhumane treatment. More than a dozen Rikers inmates died in custody last year, and an independent commission has called the jail complex “a crumbling, inordinately expensive incubator of misery.” (The City Council has ordered the complex’s closure by August 2027, although New York, which plans to replace it with four smaller jails, is unlikely to meet that deadline.)

But for some of the young inmates at Rikers, which houses nearly 7,000 people serving short sentences or awaiting trial, games provide an important sense of normalcy. Mr. Thomas said the pastime — his favorite games are the basketball franchise NBA 2K and the bullet-time shooter Max Payne — was a good mental release in jail.

“The environment is very hostile at times,” Mr. Thomas said. “It’s a good way to offset the hostility, so I know I’m still me. I don’t always have to be on edge or on my tippy toes about everything.”

Jesus Thompson, who was incarcerated at Rikers for eight months last year on a charge of attempted criminal possession of a weapon, said video games have always been an important coping mechanism.

For some of the young inmates at Rikers, which houses nearly 7,000 people serving short sentences or awaiting trial, video games provide an important sense of normalcy.

“It’s a space where I can deep dive into a whole nother world and forget about what’s going on around me,” said Thompson, 21.

Lynelle Maginley-Liddie, who spent two years as the commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction, said Rikers used video games as part of its strategy to reduce violence with programming for good behavior. In 2024, the department bought 20 PlayStation 5 consoles and more than 100 PlayStation controllers for use on Rikers Island.

“Games are not the only tool in our kit but rather something that works alongside a range of educational, vocational and therapeutic programming,” she said.

After surveying the inmates, a programming team updates the game library about once a year. According to documents obtained through public records requests, the Department of Correction bought hundreds of copies of games in 2024, including NBA 2K24, EA Sports UFC 5, Team Sonic Racing, Marvel’s Midnight Suns, Tekken 8 and Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart. Last year, it bought the latest editions of sports franchises like Madden NFL, as well as God of War and Star Wars: Jedi Fallen Order.

“It’s a good way to offset the hostility, so I know I’m still me,” Talik Thomas said of playing games at Rikers. “I don’t always have to be on edge or on my tippy toes about everything.”

Jessica Medard, the executive director for facility programming at the Department of Correction, said the games that are available do not include realistic violence. No one at Rikers will be playing Grand Theft Auto VI if it is finally released this year, and the popular Call of Duty games are forbidden.

Mortal Kombat’s over-the-top fantastical violence is allowed, however, with Rikers purchasing 33 copies of the latest edition in 2024. The violence in EA Sports UFC 5 is considered intrinsic to the sport and not gratuitous.

Constance Steinkuehler, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, studies social connections, online game platforms and extremism, topics that led her to research on game-based programs in prisons and jails.

Hate speech is rampant in online gaming where players can be anonymous. But she found the opposite at San Quentin Rehabilitation Center, the California prison where she helps lead a research project with San Quentin SkunkWorks, which is run by incarcerated people. Access to video games can provide inmates purpose, creativity and solace.

“You see, once again, the capacity of games to leave a feeling of connectedness and just social restoration,” she said.

Mr. Thomas said the reward of video games can deter conflict in jail. “It stops a lot of unnecessary things, just unnecessary violence, unnecessary incidents,” he said.

In December, at a housing unit in the Robert N. Davoren Center, one of eight facilities on Rikers Island, six young men crowded around a PlayStation 4 and two controllers as Wally, an energetic gray pit bull, bounded from person to person, licking hands and faces. The 15 men who live in this dormitory-style unit, known as the PAWS of Purpose, care for and train rescue dogs.

In the main housing area, beds are lined up in rows and dog toys are strewn about. When the men are not working with Wally or participating in school or work programs, they have access to a small media room from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. If there is any sort of rule-breaking in a unit, the officers may take away the PlayStation controllers, Ms. Medard said. The consoles and televisions are mounted to the wall and locked behind strong plexiglass.

One afternoon, there was a welcome surprise: NBA 2K26, a few months after the franchise’s latest installment was released. Round by round, the men passed the controller to whoever was next. One looked back and thanked the supervising corrections officer, who said she had requested the game from the higher-ups.

Eventually, someone might organize a 2K or Madden tournament, perhaps with commissary snacks on the line. Because there is no internet access as a security measure, sports rosters are not updated and bugs are not patched. That means Rashid Shaheed, a dynamic kick returner for the Super Bowl champion Seattle Seahawks, is still languishing on the New Orleans Saints in the inmates’ version of Madden NFL 26.

A majority of the center’s 49 housing units have a PlayStation 4 console, Ms. Medard said. The more modern PlayStation 5 systems are available only in the facility’s PEACE Center, which houses programs like driver’s ed with several driving simulators, a horticulture classroom, a gym and a computer lab.

People from each housing unit can visit the PEACE Center — which stands for Program, Education and Community Engagement — a few times a month. When the young men

congregate on the green plastic chairs to play, a corrections officer must retrieve controllers from a locked case, and then unlock the PlayStation 5 to insert the disc.

The games that are available on Rikers do not include realistic violence. Forbidden titles include those from the Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty franchises.

“They’ll have access to this area as long as they’ve been demonstrating positive behavior,” said Ms. Medard, which includes keeping units clean and avoiding conflict.

With the goal of more structured programming, Rikers leadership is considering a collaboration with Gerard Williams, known online as HipHopGamer.

One afternoon in October, Mr. Williams walked a group of four young men, including Mr. Thomas, through a session of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder’s Revenge. They dissected the music, aesthetics and gameplay of the retro-inspired beat-’em-up during a one-hour pilot session using a laptop and Xbox controllers. The goal, Mr. Williams said, is to promote games as a tool for collaboration, creativity and financial literacy.

“In the prison system, you don’t have no control,” Mr. Williams said. “Gaming gives you the opportunity to be in control, be creative and to see yourself in a way that you’re not normally seen in when you’re behind them cell walls.”

He added: “The ability to play a game or go to programs is the reason why a lot of people make it home safely. If it wasn’t for this, a lot of people would get into a lot of unnecessary stuff.”

Dr. Steinkuehler acknowledged that it could seem unfair that people who have committed serious offenses are able to play video games while incarcerated.

“It can be off-putting, but so can a lot of other programs for reform,” she said, adding, “If we’re able to think objectively about it, we’re not really doing any good housing people and leaving them with nothing to do and no social connections.”

At Rikers, video games are a way for people who might not otherwise interact to socialize.

Isaiah Garcia, 25, has been at Rikers for 16 months on charges of conspiracy with the intent to murder. He said that he missed his gaming community, but that his brother kept him updated on industry news and new releases. “It’s a passion for me,” he said.

Mr. Garcia said he could not wait to be released so he could play Call of Duty: Black Ops 7 with his friends. Until then, he thinks about making a game — something like the Jason Bourne movie franchise — that could push the boundaries of the industry.

Growing up on games, Mr. Thomas said, taught him life lessons about how everybody's role is important. "I've learned a lot, like teamwork, leadership and how to intercept bad passes," he said with a laugh, a playful jab at the throw Mr. Garcia just sent his way during a game of Madden.

Mr. Thomas spent eight months at Rikers before being released in November. He was the valedictorian of his class at the jail complex's East River Academy and eager to play NBA 2K outside its walls. "I told the bros to preorder it for me," he said, "so when I come home, it'll be sitting there waiting."