HIGH ART/LOW LIFE
The Art of Playing *Grand Theft Auto*

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I am not a thug . . . but I play one on my PlayStation. Armed with a cache of weapons that would make your garden-variety sociopath blush with envy, I slip into a simulated territory, in the hopes of conquering the underworld that is *Grand Theft Auto*. While on one level Rockstar Games's *Grand Theft Auto* series (*GTA*) is all kitschy, gratuitous violence for entertainment purposes, it is also a masterpiece of interactive design. Arguably, it presents one of the most sophisticated developments in commercial video gaming to render a highly traversable urban space, one in which a player performs actions with a tremendous degree of freedom and unscripted spontaneity. This accounts for its wild popularity in the gaming market. The best-selling video game in America in 2001, *GTA III*'s success was usurped only by the release of the game's next evolution, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, which became the year's bestseller in 2002. With the October 2004 release of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, likely the most anticipated game of the year, Rockstar has once again set the gaming world on fire with its latest sprawling work of twisted genius.

Electronic games, with their technological roots in the military-industrial complex, are commonly associated with childish play and lowbrow entertainment for the antisocial—all of which damages their credibility as objects of serious cultural consideration. When critics of violent electronic games view *Grand Theft Auto*, they see a lurid delivery device for the militaristic culture of violence—one that targets the impressionable minds of children.[1] And in terms of the gore factor, extreme vulgarity, and the sheer gall of game designers, there probably isn't anything detractors could say about the game that wouldn't be true. *Grand Theft Auto* is a bloody mess, and developers have clearly drawn on Hollywood genres of classic slasher films, mob sagas, car chases, and a rich legacy of action adventures. Presented are a series of American clichés, packaged, marketed, and sold back to us. The game seems equal parts social commentary and logical cultural outcome of combining America's ruthless capitalistic impulse with a valorized national legacy of barbarism and hegemony.

Still, what is more interesting than the moral panic around the depiction of violence is how *GTA*, through a simulated "realistic" sense of space and time, conveys an

expansive sense of "place." That is to say, a player's ability to act within a gaming environment is made palpable through the successful combination of image, tactility, and sound. By learning how to effectively navigate a simulated body within this manifestation, the quality of place comes to life. As such, it represents a compelling human-computer encounter between informational space and lived space. And it is through unscripted, performed, free-play in this highly-articulated place that the potent social critique underlying *Grand Theft Auto* snaps sharply into focus.

In terms of its storyline, *GTA: San Andreas* is fairly simple: having fled San Andreas upon the death of his brother five years prior, Carl Johnson reluctantly returns on the occasion of his mother's murder. But before he can even begin to set things right, he finds himself under the thumb of a corrupt police officer, framed for a cop killing. Meanwhile, CJ's neighborhood and his surviving family are in shambles, due to the corrosive influence of guns, drugs, and crooked law enforcement. The player's objective is to guide CJ through a harrowing series of missions that lead him from his childhood stomping grounds to outlying rural areas and bordering cities, in an attempt to save his family and regain control of his neighborhood. Notably, in a deviation from previous games, CJ is not initially configured as a criminal, only trapped under the stigma of criminality by his circumstance. In *GTA III*, the central protagonist is an escaped convict out for revenge; nameless, he is referred to as the second-person pronoun "you." In *Vice City*, Rockstar imbues the protagonist with a specific persona. No longer an unspeaking thug upon whom we can project an array of qualities, our man is now Tommy Vercetti, an Italian-American tough guy reminiscent of the HBO series *The Sopranos,* combined with cinematic references to *Scarface.*

With *San Andreas*, developers emulated 1990s genre 'hood films like *Colors* (1988), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993). In fact, one of the co-writers of *San Andreas* is DJ Pooh, screenwriter for the independent ghetto comedy film *Friday* (1995). This shift from a *Scarface*-inflected *Vice City* into *San Andreas*'s original gangsta theme is completely organic, since the hip-hop community heavily appropriated the narrative of *Scarface*. The film's protagonist, a Cuban immigrant named Tony Montana, fought his way to monetary success through the narcotics trade. Elevated to cult figure status in hip-hop culture, Tony Montana embodies the hustler mentality proper to his aggressive capitalistic impulse. Placed in a similar narrative, *Vice City*'s Tommy Vercetti conflates this narrative of economic uplift by any means necessary, with the Italian mob genre. This hybrid figure ultimately isn't as effective. But in the underdog, Carl Johnson, Rockstar achieves the copacetic melding of all these tropes. By tapping into recognizable cultural signifiers such as film, fashion, music, and slang, the designers of *GTA* are able to establish a virtual sense of "place" that enriches one's overall experience, creating a more seamless environment in which to enact the role of CJ.

The game effectively plunges the player into the dangerous world CJ must navigate, through its insistent materiality. While this may seem antithetical to an environment

that exists only on an illuminated screen and in the mental geographies of its players, nevertheless, *GTA* conveys a palpable urban texture and articulated sense of body experience. *San Andreas* presents a vast geography containing eight separate districts and counties. Each district within the state of San Andreas has its own distinct feel and vitality. Los Santos feels very much like Los Angeles with its dingy paradise skies, palm trees, and power lines, its grime and glitter all jumbled together. Flint County, Whetstone, and Red County are decidedly rural, crosscut with dusty roads and rundown towns that provide sites for dirty dealings best kept beyond the city limits. San Fierro, reminiscent of San Francisco, is configured as the most eclectic area with an artsy feel and a colorful assortment of alternative citizens. Suburban sectors are all Technicolor blue skies and primped lawns, wide streets, and fewer noticeable streetwalkers. Bridges and underpasses separate districts, making it is necessary to develop a sense of direction and find efficient ways to move about the city. Players learn to navigate the gritty urban sprawl by recognizing landmarks and remembering shortcuts. In fact, success in the game is largely contingent upon effectively negotiating and memorizing the virtual terrain.

Temporality does order the simulated spaces of *Grand Theft Auto* as well, and this is certainly one of its most effective strategies in terms of rendering a convincing environment. It exists, but in abbreviated form: one second of actual time equals one minute; one minute equals one hour and twenty-four minutes becomes a day. During these daily cycles the sun rises and sets, as does the moon. There are seasons and weather patterns. As the sun descends over *GTA*'s latest territory, San Andreas, the "lens" that represents the player's viewpoint flares from its glare. In a heavy downpour, it becomes more difficult to control one's vehicle. Visibility differs based on the quality of the day. At nightfall, the city lights flicker on. Traffic becomes dense during rush hour, and in the early morning hours it is desolate. Timed missions require an astute sense of both the hour and precise location of one's objective, and without these things progress cannot be made in the game. Likewise, players develop a sense of direction through repeated navigation of an ever-broadening territory, and will likely know the game space—the virtual city—better than they know their own "real" neighborhoods. An interesting new paradigm of virtual public space emerges when one considers what it means to become lost in a city that exists only in the time and space of the simulated.

The game's effective interface between the player's body and on-screen character is achieved through a complicated set of relations that rely on senses of touch, sight, and sound. In *San Andreas*, for example, a convincing sense of one's character-body is developed through aesthetic feedback. The game's interface, a hand-held analog controller, vibrates disturbingly when CJ careens down a steep, rocky hill on a dirt bike. With increased speed, the blurred visual image appears to shake, as though recorded by a hand-held camera. The combined effect is that of a wild ride on a vehicle that is barely under control. And though the bobbling image and rumbling controller in no way replicates the "actual" feeling of plummeting downhill on a BMX bike, the visual language effectively conveys the exhilarating rush in largely cinematic terms. The increased sophistication of rendering allows for more realistic

CJ (left) with a member of his Grove Street Families gang.


Too many donuts, and CJ gains fat.
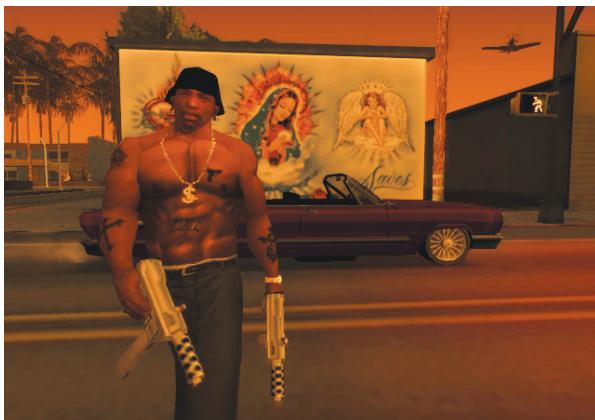
CJ pumped up and pimped out with his lowrider in Los Santos.

CJ's dilapidated neighborhood.
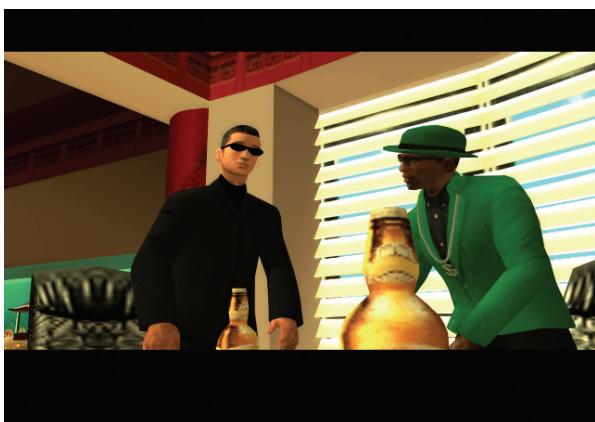
CJ and Woozie plan their next move in Las Venturas.

Photos: Courtesy Rockstar Games.

interaction with the simulated environment: skid marks appear when a car peels out on the road, a shortcut through loose dirt sends a spray of mud along the flanks of one's vehicle. With the inevitable collision, one's car reflects that damage with dents, shattered windows, and lost bumpers. A flat tire sends sparks flying from the wheel well and renders the vehicle incapacitated. Lowriders with hydraulics ride differently on the road than sports cars, which in turn handle distinctly from light trucks or vans.

A similar feedback relationship is established with architectural forms and, with *San Andreas*, a new degree of interactivity and navigation is possible in a variety of clothing stores, barbershops, gyms, ammunition shops, bars, and other commercial establishments. In hostile territory, rival gangs shred your vehicle with gunfire. Ganton, the protagonist's home turf, is ramshackle and has the sad, dilapidated, sagging appearance of a crime-riddled, forgotten place. Notably, the authorities rarely venture onto this block, whereas the police presence in affluent areas is more visible and aggressive. Through the sustained containment and control of various distinct localities, one quickly recognizes the necessarily carceral nature of the entire state of San Andreas. In the course of game play, issues of architectural accessibility and function—the shifting use-value of a site—also comes into question. For the game presents simultaneously both an array of recognizable architectural forms (shopping malls, stadiums, factories, airports), and then those very same forms made strange through their transformation into heterogeneous sites of criminality and corruption.

Although immersion within the game space depends upon *GTA*'s vivid aural environment, sound remains a highly understudied element of electronic games. In addition to the innumerable elements like traffic noises, vociferous citygoers, and recognizable celebrity voiceovers, radio entertainment provides a robust soundscape. In *San Andreas*, as in the earlier permutations of the game, hit records from the appropriate time period situate the player into a proper chronology. The gangsta rap from the early nineties that blares from the cars CJ drives includes NWA, Dr. Dre, Eazy E, and Tupac, all of whom voice the problems of police brutality, the inability to find legitimate work, and the harshness of ghetto life. Often grossly misunderstood, the potency of these artists' lyrics resides not in what critics see as a celebration of literal violence, materialism, and misogyny. Rather than advocating gangsterism, rap lyrics and the hip-hop mentality advocates the proper hardening of will and development of the aggressiveness necessary to shed internalized feelings of victimhood to embrace market competition.

San Andreas's narrative takes on a new criticality through these songs, as one is forced to navigate the pitfalls of the Idlewood (a.k.a. Inglewood) and Ganton (a.k.a. Compton) ghettoes. Through this audio, the game becomes inscribed with a kind of self-awareness that operates as a counterpoint to the apparent political incorrectness of the visual space. What emerges is the game's subtext: an experience of the dystopic metropolis, punctuated by a keen satirical comment on the omnipresent corruption

and hypocrisy that would mitigate such a reality. With the added layers of self-criticality that drive the storyline, CJ is reconfigured not as merely a violent, animalistic thug with Machiavellian ways, but a kind of organic entrepreneur who is forced to exist outside the system. His story becomes one of learning how to circumnavigate the hostile environment and rise up in a world in which he must strategically move between both the law and the lawless.

Are games any less a space of performance and play just because they do not occupy "lived" environments? With *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, a player is responsible to an increased degree for a simulated body that requires regular food and exercise, and that can be clothed and adorned with tattoos and hairstyles. This is a body that shifts with varying stimuli such as a healthy versus junk food diet. (It becomes significant to note that in CJ's neighborhood, like many underserved inner-city areas, the only three restaurants in town offer fast food: burgers, fried-chicken, or pizza.) This is a body that adapts based on aerobic versus strength-building exertions, whose driving skills and attractiveness to the opposite sex increase with experience, and whose muscles swell with exercise, or whose stomach bloats with overeating. More manageable than it may seem, a player regulates qualities like respectability, fat, muscle, stamina, and sex appeal according to the needs of each mission. With too much fat and not enough stamina, a loping Carl cannot "physically" keep up with his objectives. By practicing holding his breath while swimming underwater, he slowly improves his virtual lung capacity. Carl's various girlfriends also place demands on him in terms of keeping his body the way that they like him: some prefer him lean, others are partial to a more generous build. A hot car gives him a higher sex appeal rating; showing up at his girlfriend's house with that same car dented lowers it. As the various evolutions of the game grow ever more complex, the virtual body of the protagonist seems to demand more and more of what our real bodies need, while satirically emulating the social pressures associated with superficial appearances and materialism.

To complicate matters, this simulated entity that demands continual attention to his physicality is specifically an underprivileged, inner city, African-American male. With *San Andreas*, Rockstar has taken the poor black male body, which is encoded as a human stain on the fabric of a squeaky-clean American dream of opportunity, and pushed it into the center of our attention. This abject presence constitutes a reminder of a shameful history of genocide and slavery. Ideologically configured as base, grinning, dirty, incarcerated, and exhausted, the black body is the remnant of a national equation; a glitch that cannot be assimilated into the system. But now, that signifier of the black body, that shell upon which so many negative associations has been projected, becomes a mirror for a thorny cluster of societal relations in America.

At the same time, Rockstar reminds us of how fetishized that body actually is—or, more accurately, *will become*—subsequent to the cultural moment of the game. For the moment in which this game is situated lies just previous to the "bling-bling" era in which hip-hop became a moneyed enterprise and began to have a global cultural

impact. The rap music coming out of the era recreated in this game largely represented a break with Civil Rights era strategies for resistance and social uplift. Rather than relying upon assimilation into the mainstream, a young hip-hop generation began to aggressively embrace capitalism and rugged individualism as a means of attaining the American dream.[2] Fiscal sway became the new route to social and political influence. So, too, with CJ: robbed of his cash at the start of the game, and under the immense pressure of a social system that was not designed for his benefit, he nevertheless finds ways and means. It is the very success of hip-hop, represented in its burgeoning form in *San Andreas*, which prefigures the real-life possibility of a character like CJ occupying the central protagonist's role in such a game. It seems a startling reversal of the Hollywood model, in which the normalcy of the leading roles is overwhelmingly defined by whiteness or racial ambiguity. Rockstar's willingness to place Carl Johnson front-and-center in its now classic *GTA* series presents proof that, in a $23 billion electronic gaming industry,[3] it is indeed possible for a black, male protagonist to have mass appeal. The circularity of the game's scathing message operates effectively both inside and outside the confines of the medium, revealed through a player's deep engagement with the digital geographies of San Andreas.

Electronic games re-present "living" spaces in which a digital proxy interacts with other agents, providing staging grounds upon which to play. In this imagined space, the conventional social contract is suspended; however, this is not to say that what results is a lawless space. Rather, games such as *Grand Theft Auto* represent rule-based, problem-solving environments that require creative solutions within a defined set of parameters. Consider the value of a virtual metropolis as both an environment in which designers may re-present hopes and fears regarding societal issues and a place where it is possible for a player to perform his/her relationship to these ideas in a not-quite-constituted site, a liminal space that fluctuates in the imaginary and in ideology.

The geographies that I have described are imagined, to be sure. At the very least, games are a light distraction; at most, they constitute nuanced sites for an exploration of a new kind of liminal reality. Perhaps games are only the more interactive version of existing filmic conventions, intended to toy with aesthetic experience for largely entertainment purposes. For me, these depictions of urban spaces can serve as neutral zones in which to manifest more pervasive (and more "real") anxieties around lived social situations. Liberty City, Vice City, the streets of the staggeringly expansive state of San Andreas—these are all boundary zones in which it becomes possible to experiment safely with extremely disorienting aspects of modern life. A world-making mimetic form, electronic gaming is one cultural reflection of the vertigo associated with the dizzying flow of global economies and the tremendous pressure on the individual to adapt and survive within it. Among other things, *Grand Theft Auto*'s topographies become stages upon which to act out modes of compensation for the extreme instability of position (subject position, financial status, fluidity of identity) associated with modern life.

While I would certainly reject the popular idea that games create a uni-directional flow of information from game to human (which presupposes the total intellectual passivity of the player), games do affect us. Rather than placing a game in opposition to player, I argue instead that as an *interactive* form, the two necessarily mutually affect each other. The scenarios conceived of in games like *Grand Theft Auto* may not brainwash players into picking up guns and killing if they are not already predisposed to do so by the circumstances of their lives. This mass medium does, however, contribute to the ways in which we perceive both lived and informational space. San Andreas becomes a place because players interact with it, and because in time it becomes familiar. Players begin to know its alleys and freeways and experience the space within the architecture of the temporal, which provides a more convincing experience of immersion. One's recall of these sites has an effect on game play, which is one possible outcome. But more interestingly, these spaces are microcosms that invite us to engage (albeit currently in a limited fashion) with a sense of digital place in new ways.

Seconded only by the Internet, video gaming represents the most significant body of mass visual production since television, one that already has and will certainly continue to profoundly impact our culture. Unquestionably, this sophisticated and highly aestheticized medium has evolved into a form deserving of dedicated attention as visual and performative art, as well as consumer product. Ultimately, electronic games such as *Grand Theft Auto* exceed the limits of theoretical contemplations seeking to encapsulate or domesticate them, because they have vivid lives of their own. The performative dimensions of these complex worlds provide sites for open-ended explorations of the societies they mirror. And if we can't recognize the satirical characterizations of American culture within these games, perhaps it is because we resemble them too much.

NOTES

1. Ted Koppel, "It's Just a Game: Playing Grand Theft Auto III," Profile on ABC News: *Nightline*, July 10, 2002, American Broadcasting Company Inc.

2. For an insightful discussion on this subject, please see Derek Conrad Murray, "Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle" in *Art Journal*, Volume 63, Number 2 (Summer 2004): 4–19.

3. Tim Gnatek, "Giving Voice to Video Games" in *The New York Times*, Technology Section, November 4, 2004.

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