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"Ain't the American Dream Grand": Satirical Play in Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto V*

John Wills

1. Introduction

- ¹ *Grand Theft Auto* is one of the most successful entertainment products on record. As total global sales for *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) surpass 130 million units, the cultural reach of Rockstar Games' criminal caper competes with the likes of Disney's Mickey Mouse and George Lucas' *Star Wars* for brand recognition. However, unlike the largely wholesome and patriotic narratives found in Disney programming, Rockstar's series has, from inception, sold itself as a mature, playful, and often dark take on the American experience.
- ² Like French intellectuals J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and Alexis de Tocqueville writing of their experiences of early America, the British-founded Rockstar seems most interested in exploring "what then is the American" (Crèvecoeur III). Along with other Rockstar franchises *LA Noire* (2011) and *Red Dead Redemption* (2004+), *Grand Theft Auto* is formatively an exploration of the geography and culture of North America. Rockstar hones a unique outsider view on the American condition. The view reflects the international origins of the creative team; it also resides in the cast of playable game characters, who typically come from minority backgrounds and position themselves outside the mainstream U.S. system.
- ³ Responsible for bringing digital America to life in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, Rockstar programming teams expend significant time analyzing and decoding specific (often architectural) elements of the American experience. For Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser, the results speak for themselves: "GTA is America" (Stuart, "Rockstar's Dan Houser"). However, similar to how Disney cartoons appropriate and adapt classic European folk stories (Allan), Rockstar's digital rendering of the United States entails

significant alteration. If "Disney's America" is typically marked by themes of sentimentality, optimism, innocence, and pride (Wills, *Disney Culture* 4), "Rockstar's America" exists as a world of pop culture, money, machismo, and violence.

- 4 Intriguingly, a game identified by car crime and violent assault has emerged as a popular treatise on one of the most celebrated of national beliefs: the American Dream. Rooted in revolution and the overthrow of colonial powers, the American Dream has developed across two centuries into an amorphous but alluring myth that celebrates individualism, freedom, opportunity, materialism, and personal success. The "central ideology of Americans" (Hochschild xi), the Dream has inspired generations to "do better." From the "musty domain of print culture," modern mass media has promoted its tenets, even "enshrined it as our national motto" (Cullen 5). From Langston Hughes to Hunter S. Thompson, critics have meanwhile highlighted (and lampooned) the limits, falsities, and failings of the concept, particularly in terms of it being out of reach to minorities and the working classes (Hughes; Hochschild). Critical media commentary on the American Dream now extends to games. The *Grand Theft Auto* series serves as valuable social commentary on the twenty-first century Dream. In narrative terms, Rockstar has furnished a number of character stories across the series that highlight the futility of American "uplift"; for example, the story of Niko Bellic in *GTA IV*, an Eastern-European war veteran arriving in New York City hopeful of what a new nation can offer him, but instead caught in a cycle of crime (Moody 59). As Marc Ouellette notes, *GTA* has provided "a relentless repudiation of the American Dream and its inherent contradictory ideologies" (198). In *GTA V*, the subject of this article, the contemporary Dream is critiqued on a range of narratological, experiential, and gamic levels. The state of the Dream is very much connected with the state of Los Santos (based on Los Angeles) and its environs, the ideals and realities of San Andreas (or California) culture, and the narrative arcs of at least two out of three of the playable characters (Michael De Santa and Franklin Marshall). While Michael's story is used to explore white indulgences and frustrations surrounding living the Dream, Franklin's story, as a young African American residing in a poverty-stricken part of Los Santos, underlines issues of economic and social exclusion. The play experience as a whole aims to highlight the ironies and contradictions of modern American capitalism, and casts doubts over the survival of a national myth. In a 2013 interview, Houser himself explained how, "If *GTA IV* was a classic New York story, this [*GTA V*] is the endpoint of the American Dream" (Hill).
- 5 Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series should not be taken as unique or isolated in its critical treatment of the American Dream, with California, and particularly Los Angeles, situated as its "endpoint." In his classic Beat novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958), Jack Kerouac described L.A. as "a regular hell" where "the air stank" and "the smog was heavy" (117). In the 1980s, writer Carolyn See pithily surmised the appeal of Los Angeles as "It looks good, but that's it" (Ulin xvii), and pronounced "the West Coast is the end of the road for the American Dream," several decades prior to Houser (Miranda). The franchise plays to a long history of conceptualizing the West Coast as a realm of both bright futures and dark fortunes, a landscape of "sunshine and noir" as urban theorist Mike Davis contends (Davis 21). In many regards, *GTA V* mirrors other cultural products in its mix of edification and damnation of the California experience.
- 6 Of interest here, however, is how far *Grand Theft Auto* extends existing narratives and offers new readings. Rockstar explores the American experience chiefly, I argue,

through the prism of parody. On its release in 2013, journalist Keith Stuart described *GTA V* as “a freewheeling, nihilistic satire on western society,” and a “monstrous parody of modern life” (Stuart, “*GTA 5 Review*”), while politician Tom Watson labelled the game “a giant, targeted missile of satire” (Watson). Looking at earlier iterations of *Grand Theft Auto*, games studies scholars widely accept the contribution of dark humor to the game’s success. Kiri Miller notes how the series “appeals to players attuned to political parody and popular culture,” and that such parody allows players to “perform” violent acts in the game, but also see them as distant, fake, and ironic (Miller). Writing on the phenomenon of “play-fighting” in *GTA III*, Tanner Higgin highlights how in-game digital violence functions as both “satiric and cathartic” for the individual gamer (78). More interested in the underlying political message of the series, Dennis Redmond sees *Grand Theft Auto* as “uproarious satire” marked by a “willingness to shine a spotlight on the dank underbelly of the U.S. Empire” (104), while David Annandale, noting how “the game transforms huge swatches of American culture and society into ridiculous caricatures,” likens the title to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque in its rebellious nature and tone (89). Parody thus shapes much of the *GTA* gaming experience.

- 7 The game certainly employs satire to highlight the perils of the American Dream. Critical commentary on its nature is delivered through a complementary range of game mechanics that I refer to as environmental *immersion*, character *narrative*, and mission-based *play*. Firstly, the game world or “digital environment” imparts satirical commentary by a range of sensory experiences—aural, visual, and even tactile (sensations from the controller, for example, playfully mimicking drug use, reckless driving or fist fighting)—that together amount to a persuasive form of environmental immersion, drawing on Witmer and Singer’s definition of immersion as being “enveloped” in a game world marked by “stimuli and experiences” (227), or as Calleja defines it, “a sensation of inhabiting the space represented onscreen” (2). In the first part of this article, I look at this environmental *immersion* through two case studies, radio and billboard advertising. Secondly, Rockstar satirizes the American Dream through its character-driven *narratives* (just one element of the storytelling architecture of games, see Jenkins 2004). Often drawing on “cut scene” techniques pioneered in the film industry, character storytelling in *GTA V* is often monologue-based, directed at the viewer/player and didactic in form. In the second part of this article, I explore this element from the perspective of lead character Michael’s voice, especially his “inner” voice, given space in a series of psycho-therapy sessions in the game. Thirdly, game *play* is based around game progression and a series of missions (both main and side) that involve the player in their own disassembling of the American Dream. Two examples are explored in depth: the main quest of “LifeInvader,” whereby the player attacks a technology company emblematic of California living, and an online side quest simply called the “American Dream.” Such missions are paramount in connecting the player’s own actions with the game’s cynicism toward the American experience.
- 8 On a broad level, I argue that collectively these mechanisms in *GTA V* produce a distinctive form of digitally based satirical play. Satirical play traditionally refers to the art of drama and the open stage. A satirical play is a theatre performance marked by dark humor and ridicule, that often targets the government, corporations, or social institutions for their misdemeanors. Historic examples include most obviously William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, tackling themes of love and marriage, and

Hamlet as a satirical take on royal politics. The term "satirical play," however, might be expanded to other forms of performance that feature parody and ridicule. In the early 1900s, at Coney Island, New York, the stage-show *Insanitarium* poked fun at guests by having them unknowingly enter the stage and be rudely poked by electric buzzers and chastised by clowns before watching crowds (Whalen 103). In the 1960s, the Stanley Kubrick movie *Dr Strangelove* (1964) and collectible card game *Nuclear War* (1965) by Douglas Malewicki provided playful satire on American geo-politics and the Cold War. In recent decades, satire-based television programs such as *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, have met with commercial and artistic acclaim. Applied to a video game format, satirical play takes on similar, but arguably more expansive, meanings. The "open stage" becomes the game world, the actors become both playable and non-playable game characters, and the message is delivered through a range of competing mechanisms. The dramatic narrative of sarcasm is transmitted not just through calculated prose, but through game world details, and, most importantly, through player agency. While the satire of a Shakespearean theatrical play is largely "delivered" to a watchful audience, satire in the Rockstar video game unfolds directly through action as well as experience. Part of the broader persuasion of video games and how their codes and procedures enable "a new way to interrogate our world, to comment on it, to disrupt and challenge it" (Bogost 340), satirical play invites the player to critically evaluate the world around them. However, as Sherry Yi notes, "games that utilize satire have largely been unexplored."

- 9 I also argue that the distinctive form of satirical play offered in *GTA V* is not without flaws. Radical ideas about the failings of an American system are frequently lost in a game experience that gives primacy to systematic (even mindless) violence and relentless action. Moments of disillusionment and deeper narrative insight are punctured by simple mission priorities and money-chasing, creating moments of ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking), a problem also found in the gameplay of *GTA IV*, as Bo Kampmann Walther notes. The player's own pursuit of end-goals, gamic rewards, and completed missions awkwardly mirrors Dream attainment. To an unfortunate degree, Rockstar's commitment to producing a mainstream gameplay experience works against the satirical message on offer.

2. Radio Stations, Billboards and Advertising: Experiencing the Dream Indirectly

- 10 Based on an amalgam of Southern California locations, the digital landscape of San Andreas in *GTA V* provides a lavish and largely cohesive rendition of everyday life. The detailed visual and aural environment rewards both the casual and dedicated player. Working-class Latinos tend lawns in the rich area of Rockford (read Beverley) Hills then return home by bus in the evenings to their homes in East Los Santos (read east Los Angeles), while the sun sets across the city, resetting game tasks and the in-game stock exchange. The mechanics of environmental immersion—of feeling part of a living, breathing simulation of Southern California—includes a range of highly accessible satirical content (or immersive satire), in the guise of billboards, radio advertising, as well as in-game social media and television commercials.
- 11 Traversing the freeways of Los Santos, it is hard to avoid the myriad billboards at the roadsides that feature an impressive range of products and services. Together, the

outdoor advertising structures sell the player "the American Dream"; they impart—in bitesize slogans—how best to live, what to buy, and even how to plan for death (the Romano Funeral Home, for example, bills itself as "the dead centre of Los Santos"). This in-game "billboard" American Dream is one consisting mostly of fast food and dieting, lawyers and realtors, credit and debt associations, coffee and donuts, plastic surgery, and reality television. Everything is "for sale" and eminently consumable. The billboards underline a way of life in Los Santos (and equally Los Angeles) based around themes of limitless money, excess consumption, and also mass gullibility. The in-game billboards exist to underline the inexplicable cravings of residents, and the wafer-thin legitimacy of most Los Santos businesses.

- 12 Deceptions and lies in this world of billboard advertising are commonplace. Fleeca Banks, for example, attracts customers by promising "Money for nothing, no problem." Billboards satirize the American way of life, both in its aspirations and its limitations. Cluckin Bell, likely inspired by fast food chain Chick-fil-A, sells its chicken as "better than roadkill"—revealing the poor quality of local fast food, but equally, the mass acceptance of that poor quality. Gun store Ammu-Nation meanwhile warns freeway drivers, "take a break before you kill someone," presenting Americans as a people on the edge of violence, but then catering to and even encouraging such urges (to a degree, replicating the broader play experience of *Grand Theft Auto*, where the horrors of American violence are shown, but then players actively invited to do the same).
- 13 Traveling between destinations, completing missions, and joyriding, the player expends considerable game-time sitting inside vehicles. The car radio entertains during these periods. Whilst driving, the player is greeted with an impressive range of radio stations, including Christian talk shows and classic rock stations. In-game radio features loquacious DJs, popular songs, and snappy commercials. Like in real life, where we listen to the radio while we concentrate on our driving, the game appends the art of listening to the game mechanic of movement. It is largely unavoidable, and as such, an impactful satirical tool. Courtesy of Rockstar, the player, by his/her choice of station, helps shape the vein of the satire. For example, the in-game radio station Blaine County Radio peddles Rockstar's version of conservative talk radio. In the song "I Like Things Just the Way They Are," frequently played on Blaine, the country singer Samantha Muldoon longs for a world of "old American values" where people "pray at the start of every football game" and "smoke in restaurants," with "everything pure, just like in the South." Muldoon targets the liberal political agenda when singing, "you lefties have just taken things too far." Rockstar thus parodies conservative Americans longing for a time when, as Muldoon sings, "things were just great," and the American Dream embodied white Christian conservative values.
- 14 The in-game radio stations also feature in excess of one hundred advertisements. Catchy jingles and upbeat narrators sell fast food and alcohol rehabilitation to the masses. Mainstream US brands are parodied. Commercials allude to future individual prosperity, as well as the age-old promise of the American Dream. The commercial for Up-n-Atom Burger (a play on In-N-Out Burger) draws attention to the long history of the burger chain, heralding "from a time when America didn't worry about global warming, cholesterol or who can vote," and "from when we were morally superior." Up-n-Atom Burger sells itself as an authentic product of the 1950s atomic age. Other radio adverts position American greatness in the 1920s, with an advertisement for Proposition 14 (a fake in-game California Proposition), featuring a politician pressing

for a return to the "golden age" of the Twenties and the return of Prohibition. In these retrospectively poised adverts, the American Dream is nostalgic and historic, lamented for and pined after. In these examples, Rockstar presents the Dream as an overly romanticized concept out of touch with contemporary American needs and issues.

- 15 Other radio advertisements *sell* the American Dream as a contemporary consumer phenomenon. They capture a sense of the Dream as primarily one of purchase power and personal excess, in the 2010s very much connected to the rise of new technologies, plastic surgeries and real estate ownership, with scant regard for the plight of ordinary Americans. For example, Windsor Real Estate advertises its services to the Los Santos rich with the line, "Look down on people, live the American Dream residing in a Mansion with an immigrant who hates you," and casts home ownership as fundamentally a matter of size, luxury, and status. Excess proves a common theme of the radio commercials, reinforcing a popular idea of Americans as super-consumers.
- 16 Radio advertising also plays on popular anxieties. Strangely upbeat announcers warn their listeners of a fast-unfolding dystopia where the American Dream has no reach or relevance. They highlight social and environmental problems about to overwhelm Los Santos and the wider San Andreas community. Taco Bomb, an obvious parody of Taco Bell, promotes itself as a chain that has "fed students, poor people and drunks since the 1970s" (in reality, the Californian chain dates to the 1960s), but by drawing attention to its impoverished clientele, the advertisement hammers home enduring issues of regional neglect. P.I.C (Prison Industrial Complex) advertises for more correctional officers by noting how "the West Coast leads the country in correctional facilities," Proposition 43 calls for an end to the classic but now defunct nuclear family, while Proposition 45 suggests mandatory gun ownership and concealed carry for Americans so that they can protect themselves from an increasingly violent world. Companies such as Ammu-Nation profit by selling "apocalypse kits" for survival and warn of how "America will be plunged into decades of darkness" imminently. Politicians make their careers based on their innate duplicity, and willingness to embrace a story of decadence and decay. As Governor Jock Cranley proudly notes on his own radio advert, he is an "ass-hole" of a politician. The San Andreas Tourist Board meanwhile remains staunchly optimistic in times of peril, declaring to its listeners, "in times like these it's important to remember the good things, sure the economy may be a little rough...San Andreas is still the place where dreams are made."
- 17 Talk on the radio of Los Santos falling apart is easily confirmed by the player looking out of his or her windshield. Mirroring real-life Los Angeles, the failed experiment of the American Dream is hard to miss across areas of Los Santos. In-game locations such as Strawberry and Rancho in South Los Santos mimic the conditions of real-life Crenshaw, Watts, and Florence. Real-world artist Morten Rockford Ravn has gone as far as to document the depravity of Los Santos in a series of digital street photographs, published online, that highlight the social wasteland. Inspired by Hunter S. Thompson's novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) and "gonzo journalism," Ravn's pictures depict homeless men and their carrier bags on Del Perro Beach, abandoned gas stations, and cutthroat gangs on street corners (Ravn). The pictures collectively impart a ghostly image of depravation and decay, and of American society some distance from the realization of the American Dream, digital or otherwise.

- 18 The billboards and jingles of *Grand Theft Auto V* impart a dual message to the player. Firstly, by their overt, brazen parody, they remind the player of the theatre, fantasy, and illusion of the game world; that *GTA* exists as an outlandish and hyperreal simulation of America. Secondly, Rockstar's adverts reveal something disturbing about real-life society. In-game company slogans offer more truth than their real-life counterparts. For example, when FlyUS air fleet uses the slogan "Sit back, relax, and shut up," the *reality* of that message strikes home, of how U.S. airlines typically fall short of passenger satisfaction standards (Reed). Similarly, both Taco Bomb and Taco Bell offer cheap but far from authentically Mexican food. The satirical point of billboards and jingles in *Grand Theft Auto* is frequently to highlight how the American service economy may *claim* to offer its customers the American Dream, but the reality is quite different.
- 19 However, the impact of such satirical messaging is often limited in *GTA V* by its positioning at the periphery of play. As experiential satire, the billboard slogans and radio jingles rely on the wandering gaze (and ear) of the player and can easily be ignored or turned off. They exist as mild distractions from mission goals; part of the broader gamic architecture, but largely redundant in character development or individual progression; they offer, in fact, too little satirical *play*. When the player "acts" to engage the satirical experience, meanings can become obfuscated; for example, does listening to Blaine County Radio amount to player endorsement of conservative values? Or what is the purpose of a California Proposition that the player can neither endorse nor challenge (and that remains just a superficial reference)? The satirical experience of the *GTA* game-world may also quantifiably lessen as the player increasingly focuses on the accumulation of money and ammunition in order to survive and progress, focusing on their own play priorities above all else.

3. Narrative Engagement: Listening to Michael's Inner Voice

- 20 After a flashback sequence to an old bank robbery, *Grand Theft Auto V* begins in earnest with Michael De Santa, one of the lead characters of the game, attending a therapy session with his psychiatrist Dr Isiah Friedlander. A frustrated and angry Michael reflects on how the "opportunities" (even "achievements") of crime have allowed him to live a rich and opulent retirement-style existence in the Rockford Hills. However, instead of feeling a new sense of ease and contentment, Michael is overwhelmed by the "overriding futility" of Los Santos life. Michael shouts angrily at Dr Friedlander, locating himself as at "the end of the road! With a big house and a useless kid and I'm stuck talking to you because no one else gives a shit." Michael exclaims, "Oh, I'm living the dream, baby, and that dream is fucked."
- 21 Michael's reflection on how his own American Dream has gone sour provides the starting point to *GTA V*. The game begins with a man who self-consciously identifies with "living the dream" but feels trapped in the disillusionment that it holds. The opening film-like credits sequence that immediately follows Michael's therapy session asserts a similar narrative of the American Dream gone bad. A montage of classic images of Southern California—Rockstar's versions of Venice Beach and Santa Monica, with the camera homing in on million-dollar apartments with ocean views, yoga classes and luxury yachts, muscle men on muscle beach and bikini women on sand, all set to a

US flag before the California sun—remind the player of the “sunny side” of Los Angeles, and the “made it” culture of the burgeoning metropolis. The montage resembles typical televisual advertising for vacations by Visit California marketing or the beach life found in TV series such as *Baywatch* (1989-1999). The game camera then focuses in on the Del Perro (Santa Monica) boardwalk, onto a police officer moving on a drunken vagrant, Michael sauntering moodily by, and another playable character, Franklin Marshall, planning to “repossess” a sports car from one of the luxury ocean-view apartments. With the shift toward illegal activities on the boardwalk, the sunny-side framing of the California Dream quickly evaporates, and a darker, criminal world takes over. The noir is there, even in the direct California sunlight.

- 22 Rockstar uses the individual reflections (as well as actions) of its lead characters in *GTA V* to broadly describe how the American Dream has failed Americans. Similar to characters in a book, the narratives of Michael, Franklin, and Trevor Philips serve as “storyline” for the player. While Franklin, an African American caught in poverty, is presented as someone who is, by race and status, striving for but consistently denied the Dream, and Trevor, as psychopath and killer, seems to outwardly reject any social norms or ideals, the character of Michael is most revealing precisely because he is a “dream achiever” and a Los Santos success story.
- 23 While Michael has achieved the Dream mostly through nefarious schemes (in itself, an interesting indictment on the US system), his character clearly identifies with the Dream’s twenty-first century goals of real estate, family, comfort, and riches. His property in the Rockford Hills is an archetypal Hollywood abode, with its own electronically gated access, movie room, and swimming pool. He also owns a luxury yacht and has an attractive wife and two kids.
- 24 However, as revealed through his therapy sessions, as well as conversations with Franklin, Michael is struck by how unrewarding the actual Dream is. The luxury lifestyle seems innately hollow and aimless, with most of his free time spent watching daytime television coupled with daytime drinking. As Michael laments to Dr Friedlander, “I’m rich, I’m miserable.” Michael’s nuclear family also seems highly dysfunctional and disconnected. He moans to Friedlander over his lazy and privileged son, with all the “advantages” afforded by the American Dream, but with no compulsion to work or progress. Michael’s wife, Amanda, cheats behind his back with her tennis coach and bemoans in a group session Michael’s endless “sarcasm.” While outwardly a strong and rich man “living the dream”—as Michael often relates to his therapist “things have been good”—the opposite, or noir side, is revealed in each of the seven therapy sessions. Inwardly, Michael feels a Jeremiah in Rockford, with his “dream achiever” role a decidedly poor fit for his natural character. As Michael points out to Amanda in a family therapy session, “we’re trailer trash, you and me.” This sense of “roleplaying” the American Dream is further underlined by Dr Friedlander’s own commentary when he probes Michael on his true feelings and motivations.
- 25 Michael’s lingering attraction to stepping outside the Dream also underlines its greater insufficiency. For Michael, the draws of returning to crime outweigh the rewards offered by continuing to “live the Dream.” In Michael’s third session with Dr Friedlander, while accepting that falling back into a life of crime signified a “bad relapse,” Michael shares how it “felt good,” and far more exciting than his usual banal existence. Crime seems part of Michael’s individual calling, or even human nature. Meanwhile, the American Dream appears an ill-fit for his character. In the final

psychotherapy session, Michael imparts to Dr Friedlander, "I want to be a good dad, love my family, live the dream," but that the call of crime always conquers those "sunshine" daydreams.

- 26 For the player, regularly occupying Michael's shoes, as well as attending his therapy sessions, crime also seems more captivating than comfortable living (after all, the *Grand Theft Auto* series is known as a game about car chases and killing, not sitting on the sofa watching reality television). Through the game's narrative structure, the player spends significant hours seeing the game world through Michael's eyes, from his narcissistic self-hatred and curious taste for Bleeder Burgers through to his damning views of the American Dream. Encouraging the player to reflect on his or her own relationship and proximity to the character of Michael, Rockstar has Michael frequently question if someone is mysteriously controlling him. The therapist also consistently asks Michael to stop "acting out." Such mechanisms help the player listen to Michael's inner voices, but also question their own views on American life. Satirical play involves "being" Michael but also being a player that appreciates and develops their own critical and ironic lens.
- 27 However, how far the player aligns with Michael's worldview and frustrations remains unclear. Suggestive of ludonarrative dissonance, game mechanisms encourage the player to work against any such symmetry and co-identification. While pretending to be Michael (and even pretending to share his disillusionments), the player is equally encouraged to act in opposition to the character; collecting boats, cars, and jet packs that Michael is himself bored with and enjoying exactly the luxuries and opportunities of Los Santos Michael now detests. The overall narrative trajectory of the game—of a downward spiral whereby Michael's Dream self-combusts and Franklin's never materializes—intriguingly contrasts with the player's own sense of upward trajectory, and dedication to "progress" and "completion" typical in any video game. While Michael may insist that the "dream is fucked," for the player, the richness of experiences in Los Santos suggest very much otherwise. Rather than heeding Michael's advice, the player is encouraged through game mechanics of accumulation and reward to instead chase the dollar signs and custom cars offered in Los Santos.

4. Playing to Win and the American Dream

- 28 Games are usually played to generate self-esteem, build efficacy, and get the reward of winning (as Johan Huizinga notes, "Winning means showing oneself superior in the outcome of a game," 50). In *Grand Theft Auto V*, "winning" entails completing a range of missions (both main story and side) that advance the game's overall narrative and cater to the player's desire for progress and achievement. True to the *zeitgeist* of the series, most missions involve, to some degree, criminality, violence, automobile theft, and killing. By completing mission objectives, players actively experience satirical set-pieces and, by their own character dialogue and action choices, contribute to the drama.
- 29 One of the earlier missions involves a calculated attack on American social media giant LiveInvader, a thinly veiled parody of Facebook. In the game-world, LiveInvader is presented as the region's leading social media provider, with most game-characters using its media app and having their own online profiles. The technology corporation aggressively markets its new products with slogans such as "Peek, Pry, Populate" and

"Create Friends today." Other in-game companies advertise on LiveInvader and encourage the player to click on their corporate profiles, or "Stalk us on LifeInvader." The gamic encouragement to "stalk" parodies the "like" button in Facebook and a culture of obsessively following others on social media.

- 30 Michael's associate Lester Crest nurtures a hatred for the technology company and sets the player, as Michael, the "mission" of sabotaging LifeInvader. Lester provides Michael with a tiny package (containing a computer chip) to be attached to the new LifeInvader prototype sequestered at the corporation's headquarters. The mission involves Michael, as pretend employee, gaining the trust of co-workers at the LifeInvader office, before targeting the prototype. Michael enters the building as a budding new recruit, largely gaining the confidence of others by his hipster wardrobe, and the deletion of porn as a favor to one established employee. The LifeInvader office is an environment rich in parody of the California technology industry. Wall posters motivate employees to "live tomorrow," while recreational spaces include a "yoga zone," a "sweat lodge" and an "imagineering" room (a likely reference to Disney Imagineering). The player, as Michael, is meanwhile unaware of the ultimate aims of Lester or the true contents of the package. Having completed Lester's request, in the final segment of the mission, Michael calls the CEO of the company Jay Norris live while Norris presents his latest Keynote on television; the telephone call triggers the sabotaged prototype device to explode and kill the organization's leader.
- 31 The LifeInvader mission targets the American Dream in its Californian, high-technology guise. It critiques life in Silicon Valley and mocks the values espoused by corporations that dwell there. Rockstar challenges the culture of tech-companies where employees are encouraged to embrace their creativity, worship new age slogans, and sit in beanbags instead of chairs. Norris, the CEO of LiveInvader, is presented as a charismatic Steve Jobs-like character who neutrally imparts his ruthless ambition as well as vast technical knowledge. Norris promotes his youthful, next-generation workforce who average "14.4 in age," and talks of "weapons grade domination" of the technology sector thanks to his new mobile devices. Intriguing, given its own role in the video game sector, Rockstar gets the player to target a technology giant. By assisting Lester, Michael (and the player) become unwitting accomplices to murder. By destroying LifeInvader, they also undermine the millennial generation's American Dream rich in high technology, futurism, and social media likes.
- 32 Rockstar also targets the American Dream when setting specific goals for individual player achievement. In the *GTA V* Online Trophy mission entitled "American Dream," Rockstar highlights the role of the Dream in its own games (*GTA: San Andreas* conspicuously features the same side quest) by tapping natural player impulses to buy and accumulate. Obtaining the trophy—or achieving the "American Dream"—entails the completion of a simple, linear set of activities. The player is expected to acquire a car, drive to Los Santos Customs to obtain a tracker and car insurance, then purchase an apartment with a garage through a web-based realtor Dynasty 8. The focus on car ownership in the mission reflects both the centrality of the automobile in American culture and *Grand Theft Auto's* elevation of the car as ultimate status symbol. Rockstar's depiction of the American Dream as a "trophy" side quest, largely irrelevant of the main storyline of characters and reserved to online play, meanwhile situates one of the most important concepts in American history as something of a "sideline" to life in the game. Rockstar's own minimal definition of the Dream—"You own an Apartment,

Garage and an Insured Vehicle”—ultimately renders the Dream an act of simple and reductive materialism; a trophy there for the taking.

- 33 The attainment of the trophy is also largely a matter of money. It requires a certain level of assets to purchase the real estate. Although the “trophy” states no minimum financial figures, at least \$80,000 is required for a suitable residential investment (noted on discussion threads, most players spend substantially more for the ideal apartment (ShadowZ)). Those financial assets are largely achieved by the player embarking on a range of illicit activities, including stealing cars and robbing banks. The “American Dream” is thus attained by successful displays of criminality.
- 34 This series of actions is largely considered basic and untaxing by players. One YouTuber described the online American Dream trophy as “very easy to get and simple” (ShadowZ), and at least half a million PlayStation users are listed as having completed the objective (PSNProfiles). However, hidden rules over where to buy real estate has prevented some players from attaining the trophy (especially if they buy directly from home sellers), with “glitches” in Rockstar’s program code blamed for mission failure (Playstation Trophies). Thus, for some players, Rockstar advertises the American Dream, but it always remains tantalizingly out of reach.
- 35 The LifeInvader mission and American Dream trophy highlight the presence of satirical play within the *GTA V* game-world. However, “winning” at *Grand Theft Auto* relies less on mastering satire, and more on individual prowess at driving and shooting, as well as the accumulation of in-game money and vehicles. Judged on your ability to overcome obstacles and generate wealth and power, “winning” in *Grand Theft Auto* proves not that dissimilar from mechanisms associated with real-world Dream attainment. Rockstar actively encourages the player to seek out new resources in the San Andreas (read Southern California) environment. An in-game cash economy allows the player to gradually unlock new “luxuries” (from deluxe condos to modified dune buggies) as well as new missions. The game also taunts players to work harder, their inferior status highlighted by those who have already “made it” in the city of Los Santos. For example, on a tour of Vinewood celebrity homes, the guide jovially informs the player, “Remember, these people are rich and beautiful and that makes them better than us.” By casting dollars and possessions as gamic integers of success, *GTA* makes sure players continually chase their own digital Dream. Such a process highlights how far *GTA V* conforms to conventional notions of both mainstream gameplay and American social mores, rather than (as Rockstar presents itself) challenging the system.

5. The Satire of Play

- 36 That the player has an active (and sometimes frustrating) role in attaining their own digital “American Dream” highlights the co-authorship embedded in all video games. Unlike other entertainment media, storylines and outcomes depend on the input of the individual viewer. Additionally, in terms of *Grand Theft Auto*, the player is bombarded by a range of satirical commentary, from billboard slogans to mission agendas, as an intrinsic part of play. Not only is the player exposed to satirical commentary, but, to a degree, the player contributes to the satire themselves by choices over where to look and travel to, in-game conversation options, and abetting associates with often outlandish criminal capers. The player is thus, at times, a “satirical player,” entangled in a broad web of dark humor and irony.

37 Rockstar also grants the player the freedom to create their own satire in *GTA V*. The "open world" format of the game, with its rich depiction of Southern California lifestyles and play possibilities, invites the player to explore and experiment. Part of the appeal of Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* series lies in its provision for imaginative play. In many ways, Los Santos represents a true "digital playground." In an environment sated in satire, there lies the potential for players to contribute their own dark ironies and critical statements. As seen on YouTube channels, while some players focus on the accumulation of fast cars and money (and with it, Rockstar's own gameric American Dream), others deviate from the gameric template by exploring and burning modded luxury properties (Elanip) or taking selfies next to strangers who loosely resemble celebrities (Maxmoefoe). Some ignore Rockstar's structure entirely, and in a form of transgressive play, rebel against the "law" of the game (Aarseth 185), and actively resist the storyline by never working towards mission goals, and instead act out individualized killing sprees. Virtual photographers and filmmakers, such as Morten Rockford Ravn, create their own dark pictures of the San Andreas landscape, while others seek to modify the game code, and with it, Rockstar's world, by playing the title from a cop's perspective, or subverting San Andreas life by introducing zombies (Donnelly). Gamers have even extended Rockstar's definition of "the American Dream," by offering game modifications. In the Marlowe Valley Mod, players can move to an impressive new house in Marlowe Valley Vineyard with its own working bar, safe house, security, and airplane runway, thereby raising the bar on what a digital Dream entails (Smith). This authorial voice of the player promises potentially new forms of satirical gameplay.

6. The End of the American Dream

- 38 With the *Grand Theft Auto* series, Rockstar Games has extended satirical theater in new directions and imbued it with new levels of interactivity. Satire transforms into a form of comedy and commentary not just watched and enjoyed, but something, through the conduit of play, co-authored and co-developed. This is an important cognitive step and highlights how games can further our own sense of humor and creativity.
- 39 *GTA V* is also significant in terms of how far satire shapes the play experience. From its structures and missions to its slogans and signifiers, the state of San Andreas is a realm steeped in satire. The specific objects of satire are expansive and wide-ranging. In *GTA V*, Rockstar targets left-wing and right-wing politicians, fast food diners, yoga devotees, and the torture industry (a controversial in-game torture scene defended by one Forbes journalist as legitimate purely because of its "satire" (Kain)). The title even targets the video game industry and gamers themselves: For example, the character Michael moans how his son "sits on his ass all day, smoking dope and jerking off while he plays that fucking game." Greater satirical arcs surround both the excesses of capitalism and consumption, and the heritage and survival of the American Dream.
- 40 At times, Rockstar's criticism of American life is almost suffocating in its constancy, with its delivery across not just billboards and advertising, but through character dialogue and destinies, all encompassing. The designers themselves draw attention to this in-game phenomenon; Michael, for example, relating, "the world doesn't need more sarcasm, it's the blight of the age." The player consistently participates in this process.

- 41 *Grand Theft Auto V* is part of a long tradition of entertainment products that explore the fantasy/nightmare duality of Southern California and the American Dream (Wills, *Gamer Nation* 164). The video game joins many other sunshine/noir productions about Los Angeles. However, for most commentators, even those cynical of America's place in the world, they still, at heart, express a desire for at least some part of the American Dream to ring true, and for places like Los Angeles to ultimately highlight its potential. As Joan Didion wrote of California in the 1960s, "Things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent" (144). Similarly, in the nostalgic musical film *La La Land* (2016), struggling actress Mia Dolan (Emma Stone) sings, "here's to the ones who dream, foolish as they seem."
- 42 By contrast, *Grand Theft Auto* seems far more heartless and ruthless. Outwardly, *GTA V* works by the premise that the American Dream has perhaps always been and will be little more than an empty "myth" for most Americans. *GTA V* thrives in its depiction of the American Dream gone wrong: the sarcasm, the violence, and the "noir" is what makes the series so appealing. It crucially encourages players themselves to cynically shoot down the makers of great society, to target the police, the fire service, and innocent civilians. For centuries, the American Dream has inspired celebration, dedication, and broad-based belief. Today, by its global reach and sales figures, *Grand Theft Auto* preaches disillusionment on a mass scale.
- 43 Such blatant disillusionment helps situate Rockstar's title within a broader cultural moment in the United States, where culture wars, racial divisions, and a sense of wider unrest dominate. The game is, by design, a timely experience, marked by moments of intense violence, confrontation, and nihilism. *GTA V* is a good example of how video games speak to the contemporary American condition and can be used to explore some of the problems of US society and politics (and, in turn, contribute to debates happening in scholarly circles, including American Studies).
- 44 However, at times, the timely experience of *GTA V* is not of purposeful or meaningful design. Gamic goals clash with satirical play; instant rewards and gratifications undercut any greater narrative of disillusionment; and the freedom and opportunism of the game world belies the reality of an American Dream out of reach for many. In these ways, Rockstar's critique of American life lacks well-programmed cohesion. Crucially, the flow of the game for most players is more cars, more money, and more trophy achievements, a digital realm where, in spite of the satire, the American Dream seems very much alive and kicking.

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ABSTRACTS

Rockstar Games is a video game publisher famous for its immersive and highly detailed action-adventure titles set in America, thanks to its two main franchises, *Red Dead Redemption* and *Grand Theft Auto*. This article explores how Rockstar employs the location and game play elements of *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), a title that has now generated over \$6 billion in worldwide sales, to critique elements of American culture, politics, and lifestyle. Presented by Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser as "the endpoint of the American dream," *Grand Theft Auto V* provides a crime-laden journey through a simulated Southern California landscape ("San Andreas"). The game is awash with social and political commentary. Of interest here is how, through specific game mechanics such as "satirical play," the title targets the concept of "the American Dream," and exposes themes of excess consumption, fake-ness, and social decay in the Californian and broader American experience. Exposition of these themes is, however, compromised by Rockstar's primary commitment to deliver a mainstream gameplay experience, resulting in mixed messages and moments of ludonarrative dissonance.

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Keywords: Rockstar Games, Grand Theft Auto, Satire, Play, American Dream

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