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***Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* as Satirical Discourse**

A Critical Race Theory Perspective

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This thesis examines the Rockstar North video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) as a narrative whole. It argues that the game communicates a satirical message of systemic and structural racism in US society by magnifying real-world elements through exaggeration. The theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory and the literary mode of satire are treated as reciprocal elements in constructing the societal critique the game's narrative provides.

The main argument is supported by a multimodal analysis of the game's worldbuilding and narrative, rather than gameplay itself. The protagonist, environment and the antagonist are studied separately. The methodology of close reading is used on the main storyline as well as the game world, focusing on how both elements contribute to the satirical message of the game by exhibiting such Critical Race Theory concepts as racial representation, racial profiling, racial policing, and structural racism. The definitions for these concepts arise from the work by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, as well as Michelle Alexander. The latter's research is also used to contextualise the historical experience of Blackness in the post-civil rights United States.

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas provides a satirical narrative that condemns the United States government, particularly the way it has dealt with drug crime historically, resulting in disenfranchising of the Black population in inner cities, while using force to oppress them further. The conclusions of the thesis continue a trend in earlier research, where the game's critique of structural issues has been validated. The thesis contributes to the discussion of the experience of Blackness as well as the use of satire in video games. Regarding the discussion on *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* specifically, it provides a framework for the analysis of just how the satirical portrayal is constructed in the game through its protagonist, environment and antagonist.

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1 Introduction

Celebrating its 20th anniversary last year, Rockstar North's 2004 release *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (*San Andreas*) is one of the most acclaimed video games of all time. As a relentless urban satire, it is a juggernaut in video game storytelling, and it broke many barriers amidst its controversial release. It is the first game from a major studio to feature a Black man as the main playable character, and more complex in terms of its representation of the experience of Blackness than it is usually credited as. The satirical tone of the game has raised many eyebrows in the past but setting aside the controversy and analysing the story elements, urban design and the racial representation as a critical narrative is worthwhile.

By centring a Black protagonist in a problematic urban environment in *San Andreas*, the game provides a complex commentary on the intersections of race, class, and identity in US society. Many previous papers have misconstrued this fact and have concentrated on the superficial aspects rather than actual analysis of the justification of the characters' actions (see e.g. Hutchinson 2017). This is not to say the game is innocent of conforming to stereotypical tropes through exaggeration, but these are embedded in the satirical fabric of the game. In this thesis, I investigate the deeper layers of the narrative, and by using the latest views on the depiction of Blackness in literature and media, unveil the complex nature of racial representation in the game, as well as the implications of its satirical view to the historical tragedy of early 1990s California.

In this thesis, I examine *San Andreas* as a narrative whole, using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as my theoretical framework. I argue that the game communicates a satirical message of systemic and structural racism in US society by magnifying real-world elements such as the tyrannical police force through exaggeration. I support my argument with a multimodal analysis of *San Andreas*' worldbuilding and narrative, rather than gameplay itself: the protagonist, environment and the antagonist are studied in separate theory chapters, focusing on how each element contributes to the satirical message of the game, and which concepts of CRT can be observed. Finally, I seek to answer the question: "what is the exact satirical message of *San Andreas*?"

San Andreas, while an open world game, meaning the player can roam and explore the game world freely, uses set missions and segmented cutscenes to drive its story. This means that the main storyline, including the characters' dialogue, does not change from player to player

based on their actions. This in mind, I treat *San Andreas* much like a work of literature, using close reading when analysing the events and dialogue in the missions. To aid this process, I am using a third-party script, “Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas – Game Script” (2006), created by Graeme Murphy. To improve the coherence of the mission structure while providing my analysis, I will use a number in parentheses (1-104) to indicate the order in which the missions appear in the script, in addition to the title of the mission. Dialogue outside the main storyline, such as for pedestrian encounters in the game world, I have directly taken from the game subtitles. Since these dialogue examples are not part of the script for the main storyline and can happen at various times and locations in the game, I will provide a description of the situational context around them.

In this introduction, I begin by outlining the theoretical background of the thesis, and then go on to my primary material, *San Andreas*, and briefly explain the story of the game as well as the most important elements regarding my analysis. At the end of the introduction, I highlight some of the existing research on the game.

1.1 Theoretical Background

I use Critical Race Theory (CRT) to assess the societal critique *San Andreas* provides through its narrative, using as my primary secondary source the book *Critical Race theory: An Introduction* (2017) by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. As Delgado and Stefancic (2017,3) relate, CRT originated in legal studies in the 1970s and 1980s and seeks to study and transform the relationship between race, racism and power. In comparison to traditional civil rights activism and race studies, CRT takes a particularly broad perspective that involves all disciplines and parts of society, as well as the human consciousness. Seeing race as something that is embedded in law, policies and social systems, CRT considers racism to be a systemic and structural force, influencing everything from economic opportunity to cultural representation. The thought structure of CRT can be summarized in a way that society carries rigid structures of racism that are not easily detected without the different ideas presented within the theory. My analysis of *San Andreas* concludes that the existence of these structures is supported by the satirical construction of the game, which mirrors historical circumstances in the history of the United States. I have reached this conclusion by observing the narrative of the game using a variety of ideas defining CRT.

My conclusion rises a question about what the role of CRT is in the field of literary and cultural studies. The significance cannot be understated: since the fourth wave of feminist studies in the 2010s along with queer theory and the concept of intersectionality, the discipline has been largely moulded by new ideas, including those of CRT. With this revolution came the undertaking of viewing past works to reveal the newly relevant constructs within them. This is also true of the way *San Andreas* has been analysed in this thesis. Furthermore, I utilize Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) to understand the critique provided by *San Andreas* in the proper cultural-historical context of the experience of Blackness. In the book, Alexander explores CRT themes with a specific focus on the race relations in US society since the civil rights era. Based on these two works, some of the key concepts of CRT I am using in this thesis are racial representation, racial profiling, racial policing, and structural racism.

A crucial part of my analysis is to view *San Andreas* as a work of satire, so it is also necessary to cover the background of that literary mode. In his book *The Literature of Satire* (2004), Charles A. Knight describes satire as "imitating other forms by way of parody or using such imitation as a way of fixing points of reference and judgment" (203). This in mind, *San Andreas* is considered a satire based on its extensive imitation it does of the US society, specifically that of California in the 1990s, and on the parodic effect that that imitation has. The game is scattered with cultural references, including music and movies, as well as political talking points of the time. Almost all elements of the game can be traced back to the real world, some more obvious than others. The cities of the game are scaled down replicas of actual cities, with their own quirks and landmarks. From fast-food chains like "Cluckin' Bell," referring to Taco Bell in the real world, to pharmaceutical street advertisement with double meanings, *San Andreas* is filled with humorous and exaggerated references to US society. Understanding which elements of the real word have been selected to be magnified for satirical effect is key in realizing the game as a narrative whole. To aid with contextualizing the satirical portrayal of the experience of Blackness specifically, I use Danielle Fuentes Morgan's *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century* (2020), where she details how satirical portrayal is not only important but required to showcase the ever-existing racist structures which have often been cloaked in the era of "the post-racial mythology" (15).

Some limitations of this thesis which have to do with the focus of the research must be addressed. For instance, it does not consider player agency as a variable in the satirical message, as the essential analysis concerns parts of the game that are not affected by choices made by the player, such as the narrative storyline. This also limits the critique of violent and sexual content, as these themes are often bound to player agency (see e.g. Barrett 2006), although they are briefly discussed in relation to the representation of Blackness. The chosen focus on the main storyline also affects the generalizability of the research, as many video games heavily depend on player agency, so it becomes necessary to include said variable. Lastly, the used qualitative methodology sets limitations due to its subjective nature, whereas a quantitative study could provide a more objective result.

1.2 Introducing *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*

San Andreas takes place in the imaginary state of San Andreas, representing California, and is set in the year 1992. Following the adventure of Carl “CJ” Johnson, *San Andreas* is a story about community, crime and justice, as CJ, with the help of his friends, aims to avenge his mother’s murder and revive his home neighbourhood of Grove Street, that has fallen into disarray. CJ’s main adversary in the game is Officer Tenpenny, a corrupt police officer who exploits CJ to do dirty business for him. In the end, through many obstacles, CJ manages to outsmart Officer Tenpenny and revive Grove Street, as well as get closure on his mother’s death.

An important elements of the game’s satirical tone are its urban environments, depicting different real-world cities of the United States. These include Los Santos, San Fierro and Las Venturas, representing Los Angeles, San Francisco and Las Vegas, respectively. The game begins and ends in Los Santos, and it is the main theatre of the events of *San Andreas*. Many neighbourhoods of Los Santos are controlled by different gangs, sporting different colour attires. This is an important element of the story as well as a gameplay mechanic: wandering into a rival gang’s area might get you in trouble. Progressing the story of the game gains ground and respect for CJ’s gang, the green wearing Grove Street families.

While gang members roam the suburban neighbourhoods of Los Santos, the unbalanced distribution of wealth can be observed in some of the other parts of the city. If you go along the beachline by Santa Maria beach, you can see nice condos and people that look better off in general. If you go inland and follow the incline of the terrain, you pass the downtown high-

risers with their huge corporate offices. Continuing, you come across the hills of the ironically named Richman, the game's version of Hollywood, with its lavish luxury apartments, and mostly white people inhabiting the streets with their small pet dogs and sports cars. This is how the urban environment of *San Andreas* is set up as a part of the satirical narrative structure of the game, with its income gaps and the following social problems.

1.3 Literature Review

An overview of the research on *San Andreas* reveals a trend in which a few years after the game's release, the analysis was quite critical regarding its racial representation. For example, in his article "White Thumbs, Black Bodies: Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Fantasies in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" Paul Barret (2006, 101) sees the imagery in *San Andreas* as a poor imitation of the Black communities of Los Angeles. He calls Grove Street a "pseudo-shantytown literally under a bridge" and suggests that this is an exaggeratedly crude portrayal. Additionally, Dickerman, et al. (2008, 24-25) reduced *San Andreas* to a story that lacks any kind of depth when it comes to representation in their article "Big Breasts and Bad Guys: Depictions of Gender and Race in Video Games," arguing that it is simply about a Black man trying to get rich.

The discussion began to shift in a positive direction after some time. In their book *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, 129) describe *San Andreas* as a legitimate reflection of American capitalism with its economic issues and systemic injustices and violence as well as racial structures. Several years later, in her article "Representing Race and Disability: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas as a Whole Text," Rachael Hutchinson (2017, 167) took part in the discussion by arguing that a many of the previous studies have misconstrued the narrative whole of *San Andreas*. Hutchinson undermines both Barrett's and Dickerman's critiques, arguing that prior studies of the game "have focused on surface visuals of characters." On the contrary, she states that *San Andreas* is a rich narrative that offers characters that negotiate racial prejudice and overcome their biased attitudes. On the other hand, in the same journal, *Gaming Representation*, in her afterword "Racism, Sexism, and Gaming's Cruel Optimism," Lisa Nakamura (2017, 245) commented on *San Andreas* being limited in addressing systemic racism, arguing that the game's humour undermines the issue. TreAndrea M. Russworm (2017, 151) comes to defend the sensibility of the game's depiction of social issues: "While San Andreas plays with

satirical elements, the game's depiction of the Black urban experience is rooted in very real anxieties about race, class, and power in American society."

To sum up, the literature reveals mixed opinions concerning the racial representation of *San Andreas*. This highlights a fundamental divide between the viewpoints of the researchers: some of them have analysed the process of constructing the game from a critical perspective, e.g. how the developers might have been biased as a result of their internal racism producing the game. This is the case when it comes to the research of Barrett, Dickerman and Nakamura. The contrasting viewpoint is seeing the game as something that lets the player access a critical perspective on issues like structural racism. This is the standpoint of Dyer-Witford & de Peuter, Hutchinson and Russworm. In this thesis, I build on the latter perspective and utilize different CRT concepts in my analysis.

The next chapter describes the synthesis and evaluation of the main protagonist of *San Andreas*, Carl "CJ" Johnson from the standpoint of the experience of Blackness and argues that his character stands out in the world he inhabits, not being satirical himself, but rather a protagonist the player can identify with, displaying the exaggerated satirical elements around him. The game environment, with its portrayal of urban decay, corrupt institutions, and the satirical tone are discussed in the chapter following this, arguing that the game world works as the primary satirical character, displaying the selected exaggerated features to build a critical narrative of the US society. To finalize the argument for the satirical message of the game, a detailed account of the antagonist Officer Tenpenny as a symbol of corrupt law enforcement and racialized violence is given in the third chapter, before summarizing the findings in the conclusion chapter.

2 The Protagonist: Black Representation

Carl Johnson, or “CJ” is the main protagonist of *San Andreas*. The story is centred around him, and he is the sole playable character. Therefore, to comprehend the narrative of *San Andreas*, it is important to understand CJ’s character’s backstory, aspects of his personality, as well as his physical character features. Additionally, to make a full evaluation of the experience of Blackness represented through the character, it is necessary to consider the relationship between CJ and stereotypical tropes. This allows one to better to realize his role as a displayer of the satirical whole of the narrative story, rather than a character that possesses satirically exaggerated features himself, uplifting his importance as a Black protagonist in the context of video game history. Indeed, a deeper analysis of the character also demands an overview of the history of Black representation of the video game industry, which this chapter begins with.

2.1 Blackness in Video Games

CJ’s story in *San Andreas* is among other things, a story of a Black man finding his identity. In a similar sense, Blackness in the video game industry has wandered in search of an identity. In a generalized sense, the portrayal of Black characters in narrative video games often fluctuates between glorification and exploitation; either the character is lifted on a pedestal where they can say or do no wrong, and exist as a generic interchangeable figure, or in the other case, the Black culture is extracted for the mainstream consumption only as an aesthetic (Stevens 2021). In view of this, while arguments could be made about CJ’s character towards either extremity, and have been made mainly to the latter (see e.g. Dickerman et. al 2008), I seek to make the argument that it is neither, but instead a representation that is genuine and identifiable, existing as a device to showcase the satirical portrayal of structuralized racism in US society.

While the history of video games is brief, the industry quickly developed a problem in the form of rigid portrayal of Blackness. In a study published in *Children Now* magazine in 2001 titled “Fair Play? Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games” Glaubke et al. found that 83% of Black male video game characters were competitors in sports games, and 86% of female characters were “supporting” characters, spectators or part of the background. This was a major problem in Black representation in the early years of video games: lack of narrative

storytelling and practically no “real” characters. Therefore, while sports characters bring in a superficial representation of Blackness, they are interchangeable in a way that they might as well not be specific characters at all. As a result, scholars have argued that this influx of sports characters deepened the problem, as it kept the representation up only numerically, hindering a proper response to the issue (Gray 2011).

However, according to Russworm (2017, 109–12) the leading game makers themselves realized this in the early 2010s and brought it to the forefront of discussion. They admitted that the industry has “a major representation problem” and that they should resist “the sales fallacy,” where it appears that video games with generic white protagonists perform better financially. Subsequently, around this time the public discourse on the topic seemed to lighten up and studios produced games that had more potential in the sense of racial portrayal.

Russworm names as an example a game that made an apparently notable effort in creating a representation of Black characters Naughty Dog’s *The Last of Us* (2013). In the game, Russworm observes, there are four non-playable Black characters. However, after a closer analysis, she sees that the characters exist “without a diegetic awareness of their racial and cultural backgrounds.” She argues that this, along with the fact that all the characters are there simply to first teach the white main character something and then to die later, point to a representation that merely “satisfies an uncritical multiculturalist imperative.” While the game has a cast of characters that is at least visually vibrant in terms of the industry standard up until the early 2010s, there is a feeling of reaching a quota, rather than having characters with actual racial and cultural backgrounds.

Russworm’s paper demonstrated the call for “real” characters, rather than interchangeable, generic story pushers, who are indifferent to their own racial and cultural background and that of others. As Delgado and Stefancic (2017, 38) have pointed out, this “colorblindness” is an issue which CRT scholars have argued about over decades, and it has surfaced as a mainstream talking point regarding racial portrayal in the recent years, pointing to an equal treatment of all people despite of sex, race or cultural or historical background. This way of thinking can naturally be favourable in a lot of cases of criminal justice, where equal treatment of all parties is preferable for a just result, but falls short in instances of racially motivated harm for example. The spreading of colorblindness to storytelling poses no such concrete damage but it does raise a problem on how the experience of Blackness is portrayed: not having characters that obtain a “true” cultural identity diminishes the stories and issues of

groups in the real world and hides them under a veil of distortion. Morgan (2020, 59) has pointed out that works that showcase such portrayals “remind us, sometimes inadvertently, that our racial expectations are unreliable and limiting, while also acknowledging that they continue to linger and operate in the service of racism itself in important ways.”

The question has been raised whether a colorblind portrayal is better than no portrayal at all. Is the cloaking of a cultural background under mere implication more harmful than complete lack of representation to those groups? While it is true that characters like these potentially slowed down the development of sincere and deep portrayals, one could say that supporting characters such as those in *The Last of Us* brought the opportunity for “truer” portrayals in the future. However, it was and still is an issue that is important to bring to people’s consciousness, so that these changes can come to fruition. It is true that, at least in part they already have, for instance with the massively popular and critically acclaimed Insomniac Games’ *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* (2020), based on the Marvel movie franchise. In a review for *Kotaku*, Mike Sholars (2020) wrote about the trueness to the Blackness in the game: “I truly didn’t expect Miles Morales to approach even half of the issues it broaches, ending on a note that I can only describe as a celebration (and lowkey analysis) of Black Excellence in several forms.” Furthermore, *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* is evidence against the sales fallacy, turning a profit of nearly \$270 million for a 242% return on investment. (Parijat 2023) This shows a hopeful future of the portrayal of Blackness also from the standpoint of economic reality, where studios are seeing deep characterization not as risk, but an opportunity.

Considering these findings, CJ makes an interesting case study of a Black protagonist representing cultural and racial history at a time where it was practically non-existent. In the following pages, CJ’s character is analysed thoroughly.

2.2 Carl “CJ” Johnson

Russworm (2016, 148) describes CJ as “a representation of a kind of urban Black masculinity, where he is simultaneously cool, criminalized and sympathetic.” Consequently, he operates between the extremes of unlawfulness and lovable heroism, as a kind of anti-hero, however developing with the story in an empowering way. Additionally, his story in the game reflects the struggle for recognition, as a Black man contending with larger systemic injustices that mirror real-world racial and class struggles. To elaborate on this point, below I summarize CJ’s characters features, background and subsequent journey throughout the game.

CJ's appearance is noticeably plain and simple (see fig. 1): he is a Black male with short Black hair. Sporting a white tank top and blue jeans, he is average height and thin, although in good physical condition, mirroring a blank slate, or a character with whom the player can easily identify with.



Figure 1. Carl "CJ" Johnson. Screen capture from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004).

CJ's background sheds a light on the painful reality he faces at the start of the game. These events are not disclosed precisely, but rather implicated within the story's narrative. During the events of *San Andreas*, CJ is in his mid 20s. He has spent his childhood in the setting of the game, Los Santos, equivalent to Los Angeles in real life, with his mother Beverly and his younger and older brothers Brian and Sweet as well as his younger sister Kendl. In shocking turn of events, Brian was killed in his late teens because of gang violence. Up until this event, CJ's childhood seems to have been relatively fulfilling, growing up in the family house and spending time with the other kids that inhabited his home cul-de-sac on Grove Street.

Brian's death seems to have been a turning point for CJ as well as the whole community, concreting the fracturing of the social fabric as a result of organized crime. The impact Brian's death had on CJ led him to the decision to leave Los Santos to start a new life on the east coast. He spent the next several years in Liberty City, equivalent to New York City, where he was involved in car theft and other criminal activity. After five years, for the same reason he fled Los Santos, a death in the family, CJ decides to return home. This time his mother has been killed in strange circumstances. The actual game starts off with CJ's bleak and uncelebrated return to Los Santos for his mother's funeral.

To illustrate the poor situation amid CJ's return, in an early mission "Sweet & Kendl" (2/104), CJ's brother Sweet explains the homicidal downfall of the community by pointing out all the murders that have taken place while CJ has been away: "Things are going real bad. Here, let me show you, running man. Tony's buried over there. Little Devil over there, Big Devil over there. Man, it's just crazy - everybody blasts on fools first then asks questions second." Sweet's way of referring to CJ as "running man" highlights the way that he is at least partly putting blame on CJ about the worsened situation of the community. The harsh reunion with his brother after a long absence also sets the tone for CJ's lost identity:

SWEET: "So when you leaving, Carl?"

CJ: "I ain't sure. Thought I might stay. Things is fucked up."

SWEET: "Well, the last thing we need is your help."

CJ: "Aw man, I won't let you down, I swear."

The circumstance CJ faces puts his personality to the test. Not everyone has celebrated his return, and even he himself seems to agree that he has been dishonourable leaving the community after Brian's death, judging by the fact that he puts up almost no fight against Sweet's allegations, and swears to redeem himself. This implies that CJ has an emotional capacity towards humbleness and morality, even though in the scenes at the start of the game he is portrayed as a blank slate, not commenting much to anything, taking a quiet junior role returning to the community.

Along with his brother's coldness, CJ is also confronted by the corrupt police force, led by Officer Tenpenny, who forces him to do dirty work for him, threatening him with arrest or worse. In the opening cutscene of the game, Officer Tenpenny threatens to frame CJ with a planted weapon, talking to his fellow officer while CJ is at the back of the police car: "This is a weapon, Officer Pulaski, that was used to gun down a police officer not ten minutes ago. Officer Pendelbury. A fine man, I might add." He continues to make his point clear to CJ: "When we want you, we'll find you. In the meantime, try not to gun down any more officers of the law. You work fast, n****.".

Throughout the game, CJ expands his network to a variety of criminal organizations and areas beyond Los Santos to ultimately find justice and peace for his neighborhood, making acquaintances as well as adversaries on the way. In the end, by defeating Officer Tenpenny and former friends that have betrayed him, CJ is able to regain control of his life and establish peace in his community.

Despite his criminal background and ruthless actions at times, CJ seems to earnestly care for his friends and family and is willing to make sacrifices for them. For instance, in a major mission “Reuniting The Families” (27/104), CJ and the crew get into a difficult situation and are surrounded by the police. While his friend Big Smoke insists he come to the getaway car and escape, CJ refuses: “I ain't leavin' my brother, I ain't no busta!,” revealing his bravery. Whereas in the start of the game, he is treated much as a junior member as a part of the group, specifically by his older brother Sweet who talks down on him as shown above, but over time he is revealed to possess good leadership qualities and grows to assume authority. In the mission “The Green Sabre” (28/104), his brother addresses CJ after the incident where CJ refused to leave him behind:

SWEET: “Listen up - y'all down with CJ, right? He's been through a lot, I mean we all been through a lot. But CJ's helping us clean up the 'hood. He's taken the fight to the enemy - Showing all of us how we used to bang, what it used to mean to be a Grove Street Family. CJ, you're my brother, my running dog. I should have never doubted you.”

This remark by Sweet is a turning point in the story, demonstrating CJ’s potential and abilities, and the recognition by his brother is a complete turnaround since CJ’s return, where he was practically shunned from the already broken family.

In this section I have reviewed CJ’s characters background, most notable traits and how he adapts despite personal turmoil, and triumphs over the oppressive society, which has caused his community to fall to dire circumstances, where everyday life is survival and violence seems to be all but necessary. To summarize, CJ’s story in the game begins with a bleak return to his home city of Los Santos, where he observes the downfall of his community, reflecting racialized societal issues. He decides to stay and take action to rejuvenate the situation and slowly gains the respect of his peers and becomes a leader of the community. With his character reaching full potential, he is able to overcome the oppressive police force that has taken hold of his community.

2.3 Challenging or Conforming to Stereotypes?

While in the previous segment I have argued for CJ’s character to be a respectful portrayal of a Black man contending and overcoming issues such as structuralized racism while seeking an identity, it is important to ask what tropes or stereotypes exist within the character.

Highlighted in the literature review section of the introduction chapter, the tendency to

overlook the actual personality traits and motivations of the character of CJ persisted in the years following the release of *San Andreas*. Instead, the portrayal was deemed as exploitative generic imagery, by Barrett (2006) and Dickerman et al. (2008), for instance. In this section, I seek to define and explore the stereotypical portrayal of CJ and determine the ways in which he conforms to or challenges pre-existing Black stereotypes. At the end of the section, I will pose the question about the genre of satire: what is the function of stereotype to express the satirical message and how necessary is it?

Firstly, before analysing the stereotypical tropes of the character of CJ, it is necessary to define and look at the history of masculine Black stereotype. In his book *Straightening the Bell Curve: How Stereotypes About Black Masculinity Drive Research on Race and Intelligence*, Constance Hilliard (2012, 2) underlines the existing myths on Black males in American society and explains the twisted assumptions that have led to these theories beginning from 19th century pseudoscience. Hilliard defines intelligence and sexuality as the paramount axis of discussion that has prevailed since the invention of eugenics by Francis Galton in 1883, simmering down after the second World War, and rejuvenated by certain scholars obsessed in the matter of Black masculinity in the 1960s onwards (28). These scholars theorised that the intelligence of Black people was inferior to whites, and therefore this must affect the dimension of physical prowess, thus showing up as over-sexuality, as they considered the two features as counteracting. Hilliard explains that these harmful tropes are the result of individual scholars, egoistically mirroring their own mental capability and physical fitness to their research (57). Nevertheless, these myths have spread like wildfire and the impact they have had on media representation is undeniable. For this reason, it is important to critically analyse the tropes that are present in *San Andreas* through CJ's character, and how they are resisted.

Looking at CJ's characters physical features, arguments could be made towards stereotypical depiction, but those would be far-fetched. He is physically capable, being able to run far and practically scale any obstacle, but this can be explained through his youth and active lifestyle. Besides, his cast of friends, while all Black males, consist of various shapes and sizes. Furthermore, when it comes to video game protagonists of any racial background, fitness is a common virtue, as the player-controlled characters involved in all kinds of action sequences rely on a certain physical condition, if the goal is realism in any respect. Another point of argument for stereotypical portrayal could be his pattern of speech involving a lot of slang and

swearing, but a look at the production of the game reveals a true effort to capture Black Vernacular English (BVE), which is often dismissed in portrayals of Blackness, as Tyson (2006, 363) has pointed out. CJ's character is voiced by the Los Angeles born rapper Christopher "Youg Maylay" Bellard, who recorded over 7,700 lines of dialogue. In an interview for *GameSpy*, he commented that Rockstar gave him the freedom to put his own personality to the character of CJ (Davis 2005). Regarding the voice capture process, with CJ, Rockstar is said to aim for the "most human" character in the series (Best 2005, 52). Moreover, Bellard offered his physical likeness to the role via motion capture technology, which is a further argument for the genuineness of the character in terms of looks and stature.

To elaborate on potential stereotypes, the Black masculine stereotype of overly amplified sexuality mentioned in Hilliard's book is not something brought over to CJ's character. He indeed has a couple of brief love interest in the story, but this is to mimic a romantic life of an average young person rather than make a point about heightened sexual desire. On the contrary, CJ seems to for the most part enjoy spending time alone. As for other stereotypical traits described by Hilliard, the unintelligence that is said to counterbalance the sexuality also does not show up in CJ. While he at the beginning in the context of his group dynamic with his peers he is portrayed as awkward or clumsy, CJ shows the signs of cleverness rather than the lack thereof from complicated missions to organization skills through his leadership.

The argument involving violence as a stereotype is ignorant to the reality of structural injustices involved with the experience of Blackness the game is portraying, where criminality and violence is practically pushed upon the minorities as the only means for survival, rather than the result of individual failings and shortcomings. Arguing this to be a stereotypical trait very much diminishes the social issues regarding race. This has been a blind spot for many critics of the violence in the game, especially in the years after its launch; CRT scholars call counteracting this type of unwillingness to accept structural issues "cure for silencing," highlighted with the phrase "once named, it can be combated" (Delgado & Stefancic 2017, 51), where in principle, speaking out or admitting the issue is the only right first step to solve it, which a lot of people choose not to do to avoid any ideological confrontation. This point is enforced in a study in *Games and Culture* titled "The Meaning of Race and Violence in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" (2008), where several youth groups of different economical and racial backgrounds were interviewed about their interpretation on the themes of *San Andreas* after playing the game extensively. It was found that Black players "used the game as a

framework to discuss institutionalized racism in society,” whereas white players “displayed concern about stereotypical representations.” (279) This concept speaks to a lot of the critique on stereotypes in *San Andreas*: being afraid of the potential truth underlying in the material because of the exaggerated surface visuals reveals more about the background of the observer than the work itself. Morgan (2020, 15) has pointed out that accepting the satirical content rather than eluding it has an empowering effect on marginalized groups: “Ultimately, the utility of satire is found in its upending of dominant ideologies that render race essential and racism natural. These discourses take Blackness back and endow it with the nuance it has always had.”

In the pages above I have detailed the possible claims towards Black stereotypes of CJ’s character in *San Andreas*, arguing that a deeper analysis of these claims invalidates them a lot of the time. The game is straightforward in the way it presents the experience of Blackness in Southern California in the 1990s, so a shock reaction is to be expected from a game of its era, which I would argue induced the claims of stereotypes or even racism on the game’s portrayal, mostly based on first impressions alone. Furthermore, the portrayal of Black masculinity has been a controversial subject for a lot of the reasons I detailed in the beginning of the section based on Constance Hilliard’s research. This flawed history has made the subject touchy, where a release like *San Andreas* will inevitably cause a reaction such as it has. As noted in the introduction chapter, time has been kind to this portrayal, as scholars have started to promote more developed perspectives of racial presentation, such as those based on CRT.

Despite whether the accusations towards *San Andreas* are valid or not, it is important to observe the role of stereotypes in the genre of the game, satire. The question becomes: are stereotypical portrayals part of the nature of satirical storytelling? According to Charles A. Knight (2004, 203), this well may be: “Satire uses, even duplicates, the generic characteristics of poetry and drama to mount a critical attack.” While Knight specifically points to the act of taking familiar material in literature, the act of magnifying existing features of stories and societies seems to be the way satire is defined and manufactured. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “stereotype” as “A poem or (in later use) a novel, film, or other work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness.” Therefore, the “generic characteristics” Knight refers to may as well be stereotypical in the viewers eyes, however necessary to relay the message of which the satire

is portraying. Knight elaborates on the context of story characters and satire and states that while presented as real, satirical characters are treated as “examples of a broader problem.” (204) This is exactly the way that satirical form in *San Andreas* treats the character of CJ. He is thrown into the concrete issues of society amidst his return to Los Santos, prevailing over the structures of racism and classism that have devastated his community. It can be said that CJ is only a piece in the satirical whole of *San Andreas* while not possessing satirical traits himself. As the main protagonist, he sheds a light on the environment around him, revealing piece by piece the message in the satirical fabric, making the role of CJ as a Black protagonist a meaningful one.

To sum up, in this chapter I have analysed the character of Carl “CJ” Johnson as a Black male protagonist in *San Andreas*, and argued that from the viewpoint of racial representation, the character stood out as real and respectable at the time of the release of the game, when there was a void of Blackness in games. I also assessed CJ’s journey through the story to reveal his personality to be humble and empathetic. Additionally, I argued that a major part of the story is CJ finding his identity as a Black man in an oppressive circumstance, and that his driving motivation is the revival of his community. The character of CJ has a genuine cultural and racial background, and claims of stereotype are easily dismissible, as I argued while reflecting the character to theories by James A. Knight. Also, through Knight’s research, I concluded that as the myths surrounding Black masculinity have spread widely in society and media because of certain scholars in the past, the subject has remained a touchy one, and a portrayal as straightforward as that of *San Andreas* ignited a shock reaction for some. Relating to this, I pointed out that the portrayal stood out at the time in a way that people were quick to jump into conclusion based on first impressions of the surface visuals of the game in their assessments. I also applied the CRT concept of “cure for silencing” to explain some of the reasons behind this. At the end of the chapter, I explained how the genre of satire needs to, almost by definition, produce “generic characteristics” to communicate its message, which many in the case of *San Andreas* have seen as exploiting harmful stereotypes. Keeping this in mind, at the beginning of this chapter I stated that Blackness in games usually fluctuates between glorification and exploitation. I conclude that CJ’s character is neither, but a respectable portrayal for its time, while existing as a device for satire of structural racism in US society, not possessing these exaggerated features himself.

3 The Environment: Urban Decay and Class Struggle

While *San Andreas* has a narrow storyline, meaning all players go through the same missions with cutscenes in order to finish the game, the game environment is 'open world', where the player can roam freely and interact with objects and non-playable characters (NPC). This has been true for all prior instalments of *Grand Theft Auto* and is one of the hallmark features of the series, as is the reliance on satire. The open world concept means that for the developers of *San Andreas*, world building has been a major area of focus and effort, as through the genre of satire, the environment has been made both recognisable to the source material it's portraying, and in a manner that gets the critical message through with all the nuanced factors such as tone and humour. In a 2004 interview with PSM magazine, the art director of *San Andreas* Aaron Garbut explained that during the development of the game, the production team at Rockstar North flew from Scotland to Los Angeles and took as many pictures and notes as they could. Additionally, the New York branch of the company hired a research team focused on details, who made sure that as much of the buildings, objects and clothing of the NPCs were in line with the actual city as possible.

In the previous chapter, I analysed the main protagonist of *San Andreas* and argued that his character is a sincere portrayal of the experience of Blackness in a troubled society, while also serving the satirical means of the story. While the protagonist is the device that delivers the story, it is the game world he inhabits that fills in the satirical narrative. In this chapter, I will move on to analyse the environment of the game, which is perhaps the biggest contributor of the satirical portrayal of urban decay and corrupt institutions in *San Andreas*. Thus, I argue that the game world is the most important satirical character in the game. I answer questions such as: "How does Los Santos mirror the historical early 1990s Los Angeles?"; "Which elements have been magnified for satirical effect?"; and lastly, "What is the narrative the game world conveys based on these magnified elements?" To aid my analysis, I will utilize such CRT concepts as racial profiling and racialised policing. I bring forth specific examples of the game world and how they mirror the real world. Finally, I explore the nature of satirical portrayal of real-world issues in video games, and argue how instead of diminishing the issues, the satiric portrayal of the game world in *San Andreas* contributes to the criticism.

3.1 San Andreas – The Troubled Satirical State

Firstly, it is necessary to provide historical context to the period and location that the game world of *San Andreas* is modelled after. The early 1990s was, in many respects, the roughest period in the history of California. In 1995, journalist Peter King wrote an article to *The Los Angeles Times* titled “The Latest 100-year disaster,” where he talks about the horrific floods affecting Los Angeles. He details how this is only the latest in a long list of catastrophes facing the city, officially the 39th disaster in the last four years. Concerning the morale of the citizens, he describes that a darkly comedic “disaster fatigue” has set in. The horrific natural disasters faced by Los Angeles in the early 90s combine, in an almost poetic way, with the severe social issues of the era. As recounted by Christina Zanfagna in her 2017 book *Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels*, in 1988, the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) started a massive operation to disengage the gangs in Long Beach, California and over 1,000 police officers arrested 1,453 people during a single weekend. The use of heavy force by the state continued, and by 1990 over 50,000 were arrested, most of them Black youth. These raids made every Black teenager a potential target, making paranoia and tension set in like never before. In 1992, a Black man named Rodney King was filmed being severely beaten by 5 police officers, which caused unprecedented riot, looting and arson in the city, especially after the officers were acquitted of charges (2-3). Due to the combination of costly natural disasters and the bad management of organized crime and the drug trade, the social fabric of the city was in dire straits.

The satirical depiction of California in *San Andreas* during this era where one crisis follows another reveals the interplay of racial identity and urban decay, and the constant struggle of the Black communities is portrayed through a rough and comical, yet observant lens. The depiction reflects the lived realities of marginalized communities in tough times, but those realities are seen through the exaggerated satire as well as the visually dilated nature of the video game medium. In the following pages I introduce specific elements in the game world that mirror the urban problems in the real world, with supporting CRT concepts such as racial profiling and racial policing.

The whole game area of *San Andreas* is huge. However, as the portrayal is of the whole state of California, the map is not all condensed urban environment, but includes three cities with space in between for nature, water and rural area. However, the layer of satiric social critique

that the world presents to the player is compacted mostly in the urban areas. The game is manufactured so that you can feel the tension of social struggle in these spaces from visual and auditory cues, some more ‘on the nose’ than others. While Rockstar has paid a lot of attention to the details in the game environment of Los Santos to give an accurate feeling of early 1990s Los Angeles, the satire comes to life in the caricatures of real-world things sprinkled all around the city. Thus, *San Andreas* uses humour and exaggeration as its primary means of satirizing real-world phenomena. Parodying brand names, such as Sprunk instead of Sprite or Weazel News instead of Fox News, are examples of the game’s use of humour to satirize the real world, in these cases real corporations. In other cases, it uses exaggeration, such as when police NPC’s open fire every time for the smallest offence. Examples like these can be found all around the map and together they create the game world, magnifying chosen elements to deliver the satirical message.

Coexisting with humour and exaggeration, the game world reflects real-world racial and class division. The city of Los Santos mirrors Los Angeles with its clear spatial inequalities between neighborhoods. Outside of Los Santos are the cities of Las Venturas and San Fierro, portraying Las Vegas and San Francisco, as can be deduced from the equivalencies to famous landmarks such as Caesar’s Palace casino in Las Vegas, or the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco. These two cities carry different racial and cultural landscapes that contrast Los Santos, but they serve the story in a peripheral way, as set pieces for a certain branch of missions. The story begins and ends in Los Santos, which is the main stage of action as well as of the social critique. It is the game environment of Los Santos that defines *San Andreas* as a work of urban satire, so the analysis in this chapter will be limited to examples of the Los Santos area of the map.

The most obvious references Los Santos makes to real life Los Angeles have to do with the layout, architecture and major landmarks in the city. Like Los Angeles, Los Santos is a coastal city, with a long beachfront and a marina facing the ocean. In the opposite direction, the city is framed by hills, through which highways lead away from the city. Laid out similarly to Los Angeles, the city is divided in a downtown district in the centre, with wealthy neighbourhoods in the hills and poorer neighbourhoods on the other side of downtown. The game developers purposefully copied the architectural style of LA, for example its Spanish style houses of low roofs with clay tiles, or the more recent art deco style with a sleek, linear appearance (Juliano 2016). Los Santos is filled with dozens of minor locations that are

directly sourced from the real-world Los Angeles, such as small liquor stores, corner markets and food joints, to be found by the most perceptive fans of Los Angeles architecture (Mehaniq 2022). The most famous identifying landmarks that have been taken directly from Los Angeles are the Hollywood sign, the Los Angeles River, the concrete channel running through the city, Santa Monica pier and the U.S. Bank Tower, the tallest skyscraper in downtown.

3.2 The Depiction of Socioeconomic Imbalance

Being only one of the many similar areas of Los Santos, CJ's home neighbourhood of Grove Street portrays the issues that real world communities have gone through in the less fortunate suburbs of Los Angeles. Grove Street, while being the set of CJ's positive childhood memories and the residence of his friends, is poor and suffers from crime. The population of Grove Street is predominantly Black. Apart from a kind of general visual ruggedness, Grove Street's urban decay can be observed by several detailed examples, both visual and interactive. Along Grove Street there are closed businesses with covered windows, such as the Botanica barber shop, while the windows of active businesses like the Binco clothing store are reinforced with steel bars to prevent break-ins. The one-story residence buildings on Grove Street appear dirty and have barred windows and doors and, in many cases, wire fences (see fig 2). The run-down bar on Grove Street called "Ten Green Bottles" is littered with cigarette packages and cups all around the floors.



Figure 2. Houses along Grove Street. Screen capture from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004).

When standing on the sidewalk, the player character will hear pedestrian dialogue revolving around smoking marijuana and drinking liquor: “pass the blunt,” “let me hit that,” “can I get a swig of that, man?,” “Give me a sip of that shit,” which speaks to the substance abuse problem affecting the area. The player encounters car theft and shootings frequently when in Grove Street. The heightened police presence in the area, as well as the mutual disrespect between the police and citizens is highlighted by gang member characters rising their hands in a relaxed manner when police cars drive by slowly through the area, mocking them. Prostitutes walk around the area, with dialogue such as “want a good time honey?” Moving eastward, the houses surrounding the cul-de-sac at the end of Grove Street, including CJ’s family home “Johnson house,” appear unkept, but not to the extent of the other residences, as shown by figure 3. CJ’s as well as his friends’ homes seem to be the nicest ones in the neighbourhood, signalling the nostalgic significance of the location, and reassuring the player that its worth fighting for during the story, nevertheless displaying the economic struggle of the area.



Figure 3. Houses at the end of Grove Street. “Johnson house” on the right. Screen capture from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004).

The contrast to poor neighbourhoods like Grove Street are the areas of Vinewood and Richman, the game’s satirical equivalents to Hollywood and Bel Air of real life Los Angeles (GTA Wiki n.d.). Located on the hills overlooking Los Santos, Vinewood and Richman are wealthy, predominantly white, and detached from the struggles of low-income areas. As the official City Guides (2004) handbook of San Andreas describes the area, “The residents of Richman are from the more traditional old money sect. The houses are grandiose and so are

their contents” (17). The Vinewood sign is the major landmark of the region, modelled after the real-world Hollywood sign (see fig. 4). The winding roads leading up to the hilltop are lined by lavish mansions in both retro futuristic and classical styles, framed by gardens and stone fencing with pools within enclosed backyards (see fig. 5). The player character will encounter limousines and other exotic vehicles they will not find in other areas, and the scenery is decorated with imported cypress and palm trees. In these areas the player character will not encounter crime, substance abuse, prostitution or related dialogue from pedestrians.



Figure 4. The Vinewood sign. Screen capture from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004).



Figure 5. Backyard of a mansion in Richman. Screen capture from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004).

The extreme imbalance between the areas of Los Santos speak to the social and racial segregation present in the game's satirical portrayal of Los Angeles. A big part of highlighting the effects of this disconnect and abandonment of the Black neighborhoods by both the social structure as well as the state are organized gangs (see fig. 6), who take the power to themselves with violent measures. Gangs serve a major role in the game story and as a gameplay mechanic. Gangs have territories, which they can take from each other by force. Two major rivalling gangs in the story are the green-wearing Grove Street Families and the purple-wearing Ballas. Los Santos is also home to the Hispanic gangs Vagos and Varrios Los Aztecas. Wandering into a rival gang's area means danger for the player character: encountering gang members will activate threatening dialogue followed by gunfire. The player can either escape or fight the rival gangs, aiming for a chance to claim new territory for the Grove Street Families. Although primarily identified on the game map with colours, the gang territories in the game use strong visual markers in the environment, such as graffiti, clothing and hand signs to reinforce division.



Figure 6. Members of the Grove Street Families gang. Screen capture from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004).

In the game story, multiple missions deal with gang affiliation. Early in the game, at the end of the mission “Sweet & Kendl” (2/104), CJ is ordered by his friend Ryder to purchase green clothing suitable for the Grove Street families: “Yeah, and get yourself some colours, fool.

And a haircut -it's embarrassing to be seen with you!" While this is an encouragement for the player to introduce themselves to the mechanics of character customization, it speaks to the importance of representing one's community in the society portrayed in the game. The importance of gang affiliation is deepened when in the mission "Tagging Up Turf" (4), CJ is ordered to paint over the Ballas' purple graffiti around town with Grove Street green. After this introduction to the gang lifestyle, a little later on in the mission "Doberman" (25), CJ with the help of fellow gang members fight the Ballas gang to take a piece of territory from them. The on-screen preface of the mission reads: "This is Glen Park, which is Ballas territory. You must take out the enemy gang to gain this territory as your own." After the mission is completed successfully, the screen reads: "The territory is now owned by the Grove Street Families and is marked green on the radar." The way that gang mentality is treated in the game borders glorification but is deeply linked in the community of CJ and his friends. This portrayal points to a society that has failed to deliver social structure, allowing gang affiliation to replace it.

The gang presence is a spitting image of the problems of the early 1990s Los Angeles, viewed as an escalation of the badly managed social fabric of the city, as explored at the beginning of this chapter. The gangs depict the societal problems of the internalized racism and community fragmentation as a product of many factors in the United States history, such as segregation of the Black population and the war on drugs, which is explored in the next chapter. This is how *San Andreas* portrays the urban areas not only as a facade set up for the main character to roam and complete the storyline, but as a realistic system that involves power hierarchies such as the police force as a counter to the organized crime. Next, I provide dialogue and gameplay examples of law enforcement in the game to show how they are a part of the critique towards the imbalanced powers of the depicted society.

The police are seen patrolling the streets of Los Santos on foot, by motorcycle and car. If the player character does something illegal when the police are nearby, they will instantly start a pursuit and fire their weapons. The police presence decreases significantly when the player enters some of the wealthier areas in the city, reflecting real-world racial profiling. As described by Delgado and Stefancic (2017, 120-121), CRT scholars see that real world unfair policing and criminal justice towards the Black population often concerns the way crime is defined: the offenses prevalent in marginalized neighbourhoods, such as painting graffiti, congregating on a street corner are policed unproportionally to "white collar crime," such as

embezzlement or bribery. Similarly, sentences for crack cocaine remain harsher against the more expensive powdered cocaine (121). *San Andreas* portrays this kind of racial profiling: the low threshold for the police to attack the player for any offense reveals their attitude towards the Black population, where they feel entitled to instantly incriminate them.

The dialogue concerning the police NPCs in different gameplay situations reveals their tyrannical nature: when the police are pursuing CJ after he has committed a crime, the dialogue options of the police are violent and tyrannical: “Move, and I’ll murder you!,” “You wanna die?!,” “I’m gonna have some fun with you, asshole!,” “I told you not to screw with me!,” “Catch him or shoot him, I don’t give a shit!” If they catch CJ, his dialogue options also reflect the distrust to the institutions of power: “I don’t want y’all doing nothing funny to me at the station.,” “This makes you happy, doesn’t it?,” “I got money, officer. Take it! Make your wife happy!,” If the case is that CJ helps to catch an escaping criminal that the police are chasing in the open world, their dialogue options are equally disturbing, further pointing to the tyrannical state of the police: “Don’t worry, man. We’ll molest him in the station.,” “I’ll give this asshole a beating for you.”

The game satirically depicts the use of force by the authorities as absolute through exaggerated dialogue and action. The police will open fire on the player for the smallest offence, such as hitting a pedestrian with a vehicle by accident. The amount of police NPCs included in the game, the unequal distribution of force to the poorer areas, as well as the absolute use of power points to the situation of the early 1990s Los Angeles, as detailed at the beginning of the chapter. The game developers not only involve the police force in their societal critique but make them a major part of the satirical environment built for the game.

3.3 Satirical Tone: Contributing to the Critique?

As argued on the pages above, the game environment of *San Andreas* is built as a highly satirical landscape of societal critique, through humour, and more importantly exaggeration. Some important questions about the genre of satire arise while observing the game world: does the message make it right to create an entertaining virtual space based on actual tragedy in the real world? Do the ends justify the means when it comes to storytelling? According to the art director Aaron Garbut, the game environments of the *Grand Theft Auto* series are places where all senses are heightened and “everything is a caricature, an exaggeration of the world” (PSM 2004). Considering this, it is in the nature of satire to caricaturize, or ludicrously

distort serious issues, in order to provide the critical message. This is clear in Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), where he suggested using children as food for the wealthy to save on costs, or in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), where farm pigs orchestrate a brutal authoritarian regime. In comparison to these classic works of satire, the major differentiating factor is the medium of video games, where the visual and the interactive nature creates extra levels to the content. This can have the effect of diluting the full scale of critique, whereas in literature, it is standard to treat the work as a whole, not based on snippets here or there, ignoring the punchline from the way of the setup when it comes to the narrative whole of the satirical work. Additionally, Morgan (2020, 3) argues that it is the laughter resulting from a humorous satirical portrayal itself that serves a major role in validating the complexity of race, or "kaleidoscopic Blackness," which combats the simplification of the issues, and promotes the multi-dimensional ways in which Blackness can be presented.

In this chapter I have analysed the game environment of *San Andreas*. I started with a background look at the historical early 1990s California and explained the tough time the state was going through during this period, suffering from disaster after another, both natural and social kind. The law enforcement trying to take hold of the gangs and the drug trade only deepened the issues, and the social fabric was devastated. I discussed briefly the production process of the game, where Rockstar paid considerable attention to capture the environment of the game in a realistic way. I moved on to discuss the similarities between Los Santos and the real-world Los Angeles through layout, architecture and famous landmarks, and concluded that while taking the realistic portrayal seriously, the developers have manufactured the game world to be primarily a playground of satire, using humour and exaggeration sprinkled throughout. I argued that these aspects coexist with the serious issues that are portrayed in the game, such as class inequality, and the juxtaposition of the police force and gangs in the game. I further argued for the tyrannical portrayal of the police with dialogue examples from the game. Lastly, I noted that while portraying the serious issues in an absurd and often humorous light, Rockstar has delivered the satiric message skilfully with their game environment, magnifying certain features to enhance critique. However, because of the video game medium, this is easily misunderstood, when compared to classic literature examples.

To sum up, and to answer the question posed at the beginning of the chapter, "which elements have been magnified for satirical effect?" and "what is the narrative the game world is

conveying based on these magnified elements?,” in the game environment of *San Andreas* the primary features that have been magnified for satiric effect are the unequal powers of gangs and the police force, both through exaggeration. Based on these elements, through the game world *San Andreas* poses a narrative, where the social fabric of the society has been lost due to mismanagement of the historical issues of race and class, and consequently the gangs have taken power to their own hands with violent measures. Further escalating the issue, the police force is countering this with equal force and has tyrannicalized in the process. In the next chapter, I will go further into the issues portrayed by the game environment I established in this chapter, and argue how the antagonist in the game, Officer Tenpenny, is the main symbol of corruption, institutionalized racism and police brutality.

4 The Antagonist: Law Enforcement and Structural Racism

In the chapter above, I concluded that the imbalance of the law enforcement and the gangs in the game environment are the primary magnified features of *San Andreas* used to deliver a critical satiric message about early 1990s California. However, this self-perpetuating and deeply destructive conflict is not only communicated through police and gang member NPC's as part of the game world, but also through the story of the game, where the antagonist Officer Frank Tenpenny embodies the characteristics of corrupt power that *San Andreas* is portraying in its social critique. In this chapter, I will introduce the character of Officer Tenpenny, analyse his position in the game's story and suggest that he is the primary symbol for tyrannical violence and police brutality in the game. From this perspective, I explore the further meaning that his character brings to *San Andreas*' critique on US society: I view the character of Officer Tenpenny through its socio- historical context by relating it to the "Rampart scandal" of the real-life LAPD, utilizing Michelle Alexander's work that explores the era of Black mass incarceration in the United States with the concepts of CRT.

4.1 Officer Frank Tenpenny

Officer Frank Tenpenny is the main antagonist of *San Andreas*. He is a Black man in his mid-40s, and his character is voiced by the actor Samuel L. Jackson. He is a corrupt officer of the Los Santos Police Department (LSPD), and the leader of the C.R.A.S.H unit (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums). C.R.A.S.H's job is to target street gangs specifically, and is based on a unit of the same name in real world Los Angeles of the 1990s. The spread of corrupt power of Officer Tenpenny reflects the structural racism affecting the urban Black population of the era in California as well as in the United States as a whole.

During the story of *San Andreas*, Officer Tenpenny is revealed to have a broad network of influence, spreading chaos all around him. He controls the drug trade through both the Grove Street Families and Ballas gangs, pushing them against each other at the same time, which has a devastating effect on the larger marginalized communities. The full extent of Tenpenny's reach, as well as his philosophy on life, is revealed piece by piece throughout the story of *San Andreas* from the perspective of the main character CJ. The development of Tenpenny's character happens gradually, between the first encounter in the games introduction, and the last mission of the game when CJ overcomes him and leaves him to die. Tenpenny's character

arc can be described as the growth of his crookedness, continuing with each interaction, finally showing in the end that the potential of his corrupt power and lack of empathy are only limited by his death.

As described in chapter 2 on the subject of the protagonist, the first encounter CJ has with Officer Tenpenny is at the start of the game, when upon arriving back to Los Santos for his mother's funeral, Tenpenny picks him up and establishes that if CJ does not obey him, he will be framed for a murder of a police officer. This introduction to the character of Officer Tenpenny is powerful in that it instantly reveals his core traits of corruption and oppression, as well as establishing the power dynamic between CJ and Tenpenny, forcing CJ to comply instantly upon his return to the city. The fact that Tenpenny himself is a Black man doesn't seem to affect their dynamic in any way, as the officers that accompany him in the police car are hispanic and white, both seemingly below him in status. The ignoring of the personal race dynamic between Tenpenny and CJ, and the fellow officers, signals that Tenpenny, rather than showcasing an internalized bias, symbolises the structural racism of the establishment, something that becomes evident later.

Although the introduction makes Tenpenny to be a malicious corrupt officer, seemingly working by himself and a couple close officers with no major affiliations, in the end, it is revealed that his corruption is systematic and structural. The second encounter with Tenpenny is at the start of the mission "Running Dog" (12), when CJ goes to visit his friend Big Smoke, and Tenpenny is there. CJ is surprised to see him, but Big Smoke explains that they are not affiliated but the police are simply harassing him: "Those nosey mother-fuckers won't leave me alone! Think I'm Mr. Big, or something. But I don't tell them shit." CJ's suspicion is raised about the dealings between Big Smoke and Tenpenny, foreshadowing the revelations of their relationship further in the story.

CJ next encounters Tenpenny during the mission "Catalyst" (16), where Tenpenny shows up at his friend's Ryder's house who is cooking cannabis-based drugs in a pot. Tenpenny comes by to tell them that a munitions train is coming through town, and they should rob it. Tenpenny reminds CJ that he is under his control and demands a portion of the substance Ryder is making, revealing for the first time his personal taste for narcotics, as well as his lack of morals regarding crime as long as it is conducted under his control. This interaction also

gives the impression that Tenpenny is comfortable in doing his corrupt work while patrolling in uniform, going boldly into people's houses uninvited as a reminder of his power.

In the mission "Burning Desire" (23), CJ runs into Tenpenny at a doughnut shop. Tenpenny calls him over and strictly lets CJ know that he is in control and threatens him. In the next mission "Gray Imports" (24), CJ again runs into Tenpenny, who says he is not glad CJ hasn't been in contact with him and orders him to go disrupt a deal between the Ballas gang and Russian arms dealers, which they do. At this stage Tenpenny aggressively shows dominance over CJ. This is also the first instance where Tenpenny incites violence against an enemy gang, which points to the player that his affiliation with specific gangs might reach further than first believed. The trend continues in mission "Los Sepulcros" (26), where Tenpenny tips off a Ballas funeral to Ryder and CJ and encourages them to go and strike them when the whole enemy gang is present. It becomes apparent that Tenpenny is fuelling the fight between the two gangs.

A dramatic revelation is made in the mission "The Green Sabre" (28), where CJ finds out that two of his gang members and childhood friends, Ryder and Big Smoke, have been secretly working for Ballas as well as Officer Tenpenny. They set up the Grove Street gang to face an ambush, but during the gunfight CJ's brother Sweet gets injured, and CJ is captured by Tenpenny. He takes CJ into a remote location in the woods, and tells him that if he comes back, his brother, who is now at the hospital, will suffer the consequences. This starts off a new unofficial chapter in the game, where CJ is in exile from Los Santos, and the next missions revolve around CJ completing tasks for Tenpenny in the countryside. In mission "Body Harvest" (32), CJ meets Tenpenny in a motel for an assignment. The policeman is sitting in a chair, barely awake doing drugs while giving out orders, signalling his chaotic existence and carelessness.

Through twists and turns CJ gets back to Los Santos, and in the mission "Misappropriation" (89), Tenpenny meets CJ and explains his motivation – a version of a philosophy of kill or be killed: "We're all the same, Carl – you, me. We're all trying to pull ourselves out of the hole. Somebody steps on me, I gotta step on you." Reflecting Tenpenny's personal motivation to the crisis of law enforcement of the real life early 1990s California explored in chapter 3 of this thesis, the narrative the game has created is, in its essence, that Tenpenny, as the symbolic

representation of the corrupt force, feels that he is entitled to act in a tyrannical way in self-preservation.

In the second to last mission “The Riot” (103) the games story takes a sidestep from complete fiction to a direct indication of actual events, already hinted in the title. In the mission, CJ and his friends sit on a couch watching television news, where the recently arrested Officer Tenpenny’s court sentencing is about to be announced. It is revealed that all charges against him are dropped. CJ and his friends are shocked and a conversation of the aftermath of the case ensues. Cesar is sure of the uprising of the public: “Look. The whole city is going up. People are fucking pissed off about this.” CJ wonders about the wider context of the situation: “People don’t know what they want. We’re all being used.” CJ’s new friend The Truth blames governmental hierarchies for the injustice “You see, man? It’s always the same, friend. Power systems corrupt.” Considering the historical context of the games setting as a representation of 1992 Los Angeles, the scene points to the historical Los Angeles riots of the same year, linking Officer Tenpenny as a representation of the police officers who were let off after the video of their beating of Rodney King. The conversation of the characters mirrors the public reaction and the aftermath of the trial, when the riots broke out all over the city.

The idea of Tenpenny’s entitlement and the incapability of seeing his wrongdoing is enforced during the last mission of the game “End of The Line,” (104) where CJ and his brother take down Big Smoke. After the fight, Tenpenny shows up and a chase scene ensues. Tenpenny crashes and as he lays on the ground, about to die, with his last powers he gives a chaotic but telling final statement:

OFFICER TENPENNY: Come on, assholes. I’ll take you all. You’re mine! Mine!
I run this town! Hey, over here! Hey! Officer down! Come on! HEY! Assholes!
You never understood what I did! Fifty of me and this town would be OK. I took
the trash out! I DID! And I’d do it all again...

Tenpenny’s remarks at the end of his life summarize his thoughts on his own actions. He feels that after all the corruption and senseless killing he did the right thing, justifying his doings for the goal of somehow fixing the city. He simultaneously boasts about his power by stating “You’re mine” and “I run this town,” and tries to garner sympathy by referring to himself as misunderstood, and lastly defends his actions to the bitter end, showing no remorse, while calling the criminals he once accompanied, but in his mind helped eliminate, as “trash.” This finalizes the satirical portrayal of the corrupt institution of the early 1990s California the game

showcases through the character of Officer Tenpenny. The conclusion of my analysis on Tenpenny's character is that the message he encapsulates is that the power given to the authorities has blinded them into simultaneously harming the cause they are supposed to stand by, while feeling completely entitled in doing so for the assumed greater good of society, showing no empathy for the marginalized communities.

4.2 Tenpenny as a Reflection of Racial Dynamics in the US

Observing Officer Tenpenny's characters dialogue and actions in *San Andreas*, a few themes prevail: corruption, power, a certain ruthlessness about his actions, and control of those in weaker positions than him. Keeping this in mind, there is an example of real-world instance connected to the story and themes of *San Andreas*, further emphasizing the points the game is making about the societal issues of the era.

Beginning in 1997, the so-called Rampart scandal of the LAPD revealed widespread corruption within the real-life C.R.A.S.H anti-gang unit that Officers Tenpenny's character is in charge of in the game. It was exposed that officers were, among other things, affiliated with gangs, threatening people with violence, masterminding bank robberies, beating witnesses and stealing seized drugs (PBS n.d.). One arrested officer named Rafael Pérez made a cooperation deal with the department for a shorter jail sentence and gave information on the crimes. According to Pérez, it was the culture of the C.R.A.S.H unit to glorify corrupt behaviour and even killings. The officers used to boast about wounding or killing subjects, gifting one another special plaques for these "accomplishments." He said it was commonplace for officers in the unit to carry extra guns to plant to civilians to evade liability for the violent acts they committed (Young n.d.). The investigation and further revelations made by Rafael Pérez revealed the C.R.A.S.H unit to be corrupt to the core throughout the 1990s in California, and a definite inspiration to the unit of the same name in *San Andreas*, spearheaded by Officer Tenpenny's character.

Shown throughout his journey during the story and supported by the real-life influence described above, Tenpenny's control of CJ and his friends mirrors real-world racialized policing, where Black people are disproportionately targeted and imprisoned, a phenomenon defining post-civil rights era racial dynamics in the United States. The development leading to the crisis of discrimination faced by California in the early 1990s, but also many other parts of the country, is described in detail by Michelle Alexander in her book *The New Jim Crow*:

Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (2010), which has become a staple among the works exploring key CRT concepts, such as colorblindness, systemic racism, and law as a tool of oppression. She argues that after the civil rights progress of the 1960s, the traditional ways of segregating and devastating the Black population have been replaced with mass incarceration (55). Alexander calls this “the new Jim Crow,” as per the title of her book, pointing to the Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation from the end of the 19th century all the way to 1965.

Alexander (2010, 48) explains how during the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, supported by widespread media campaigns, new anti-drug measures took place, which included heavy police presence in Black communities with supposed problems with the distribution and use of crack cocaine. However, these measures also covered many inner-city neighbourhoods where such problems never existed or were yet to exist. This way many Black communities were subjected to unjust scrutiny by the police force, which escalated into paranoia, unfairly labelling Black people as criminals and mass imprisoning them subsequently (56). At the same time, as it was later revealed, the CIA was supporting the Nicaraguan Contra faction, which was illegally distributing cocaine in the cities of the United States, an issue the Reagan administration looked the other way on and stopped border officials from intervening the drug smuggling operation (11). Alexander explains how the combination of the unsolicited heavy police presence in Black neighbourhoods and the flowing of drugs indirectly supported by the United States government is by some seen as a calculated plan to destroy or at least immobilize the Black population of the country (193).

The story and themes of *San Andreas* follow Alexander's argument: the same way the Reagan administration's policies through “the war on drugs” (48) disproportionately targeted Black communities, leading to systemic oppression, Officer Tenpenny controls CJ and his community, simultaneously fuelling the fight between the gangs and controlling the drug trade.

In this chapter, I have shown how through the character of Officer Tenpenny, *San Andreas* communicates the message of how the police has turned against the Black population, using corrupt and tyrannical means to hold power over them, shedding a light to the societal crisis of the historical early 1990s California. I supported this argument with Michelle Alexander's theories framed by CRT in her book, where she details the history of Black oppression in the

United States since the civil rights era, and argues that the combination of the Reagan administrations targeted policing of Black communities and allowing the Contra faction to smuggle drugs to the cities of the US created a new era of segregation through mass incarceration. Alexander's talking points line up with the themes of *San Andreas*, especially through the character of Officer Tenpenny as the symbol of structural racism. The real life revelations of the C.R.A.S.H unit, while complimenting the portrayal of tyrannical corruption in the game, combined with the analysis by Alexander, show that Officer Tenpenny's character symbolically portrays the deeper structural issues of the United States in the early 1990s, where the administration has betrayed the Black population, practically rounding them up in the ghettos and using the power of the police units to unfairly monitor, demoralize and mass imprison them.

5 Conclusion

This thesis has explored how in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), the literary mode of satire is used to deliver a critical message about the structurally racist society in the United States, particularly that of California of the early 1990s. To analyse the satirical effect in the game, I have used Critical Race Theory as my theoretical structure and have shown how its concepts can help to reveal just how the satirical intent is present in the perspectives of the protagonist, the game environment and the antagonist.

I began by introducing the primary material, the theoretical background, as well as past literature on the game, of which I derived that the most critical views of *San Andreas* appeared in the few years after its release. The research turned in a more positive direction around 2010, and particularly the representation of Blackness of the game was then seen in a better light. I gathered from this that the scholars analysing the game were divided into two camps: those who criticized the process of making the game, and those who began the analysis from the game itself, and what it is attempting to say about the US society in a critical way. I argued that the first group was focused on the initial impressions of the game, arguing the game to showcase stereotypes, while the second group understood the game as satirical portrayal, with exaggerated features that had been selected to deliver the critical message. I count myself to belong in the second group, setting as my task to uncover the satirical message of the game by using CRT as my theoretical framework.

In the first chapter, my analysis concerned the protagonist of the game, Carl “CJ” Johnson. As he is the first Black protagonist in a major video game release, I decided to firstly look at the history of Black representation in games and how the character fits in this timeline. From the get-go, video games had an issue of representation when it came to Black characters, either consisting of sports characters or secondary characters, with no true cultural background. I discussed the issue of “true” representation of Blackness, where the character is realistic to their cultural heritage. While for a long time, Black characters were not given such background, in the early 2010’s video game executives began incorporating diversity in their products. However, the concept of colorblindness hindered the process: while games started having more variability in terms of racial representation, the characters were often interchangeable, only diverse in terms of their visuals, so true representation was not fulfilled despite the efforts. However, recent successes in the field such as *Marvel’s Spider-Man: Miles*

Morales (2020) display examples of a hopeful future of the representation of Blackness in video games. Seeing Black representation in video game history as lacking at best, I argued that *San Andreas*' CJ is an interesting case study as a Black protagonist with a genuine cultural background at a time where no such character had existed. I recounted the characters features, background and development throughout the game story. I then explored the potentially stereotypical aspects of his portrayal, concluding that claims of stereotypical portrayal arose from the way early critics of the game discounted the satirical effects of the exaggerated world around the character itself. Furthermore, CJ's character evades many historical stereotypes regarding the relationship of intellectuality and sexuality. I concluded that CJ's character is a respectably "true" portrayal in terms of cultural background, and by not possessing exaggerated satirical features himself, his function is to showcase the satirical whole of the game as an identifiable character, making him significant as a Black protagonist.

In the next chapter, I moved to analyse the game environment and argued it to be the main display of satire in the game. I first explained the historical and geographical context of the game world, by recounting the natural and societal crises affecting the historical early 1990s California. I detailed the mismanagement of drug issues and the attacking of marginalized communities, particularly Black youth, to showcase the basis of the game world of *San Andreas*, which displays these issues, and are related to several CRT concepts I'm exploring. I introduced the game world with its different parts and explained how the main area as well as the primary theatre of satirical portrayal is the city of Los Santos. I analysed how *San Andreas* uses humour and exaggeration as tools of satire in the game world. I also explained how unequal wealth distribution can be observed by the different neighbourhoods, resulting in concentration of marginalized groups in the poorer areas, which also show heightened police presence. With this in mind, I argued how the game world displays such CRT concepts as racial profiling and racial policing. I further explored how *San Andreas* displays the police as tyrannical and constantly at conflict with the gangs, which also play a major part in the game. I conclude that as part of the game world of *San Andreas*, the police and the gangs are the primary magnified elements, using exaggeration as the method of satire to showcase the message of structural racism, which I elaborated next.

In the final chapter, I moved to analyse the antagonist of the game, the corrupt Officer Tenpenny. I argued that Officer Tenpenny is the main symbol of police brutality, racialized violence, and more importantly, systemic racism of the US society. While a Black man like

CJ, his personal race identity is swallowed by him being a tool for the structurally racist establishment. I first recounted Officer Tenpenny's actions through the game story from the perspective of the protagonist CJ, and explained how the level and reach of Tenpenny's corrupt power is revealed slowly through the events of the story. In this, I analysed Tenpenny's characters motivations for his actions as well as his lack of remorse at the end of his life, concluding that Tenpenny represents a type of corruption that is persistent and entitled, which resonates with the historical occurrences of the early 1990s California, which I explored next. The conclusions that I made about Tenpenny's characters came together with a certain real-world instance called "the Rampart scandal," where in the real C.R.A.S.H. unit of the LAPD widespread corruption and tyrannical behaviour was uncovered, leading to the arrest of several police officers, who were setting up robberies, stealing confiscated drugs, planting weapons and taking part in unsolicited killings. The actions of the real world C.R.A.S.H. unit align with those of Officer Tenpenny in *San Andreas*. I elaborated on this by recounting the history of race relations of the US, which is the reason tyrannical units existed in the first place: through "the war on drugs," which resulted in unfair racial profiling, and eventually mass imprisoning of the Black population. Alexander calls this cycle of systemic incarceration of the Black population "the new Jim Crow."

In addressing the question regarding the exact satirical message of *San Andreas*, in the thesis I have taken several steps to answer this. By first analysing the protagonist, I determined it to be a respectable cultural representation of a Black man finding his identity in a faulty society, not himself showing satirical features, but displaying them in his surroundings. I then analysed the environment, concluding that it is constructed to satirically portray, through exaggeration, wealth imbalance and racial inequality, and showcase such phenomena as racial profiling and racial policing. Finally, I analysed the character of Officer Tenpenny as a symbol for structural racism, comparing his actions to the real world "Rampart scandal," and framing this with Michelle Alexanders work, which explores through CRT concepts the history of race relations in the US, which has led to the crisis of Black mass incarceration.

Alexanders argument combined with the real-life influence on Officer Tenpenny, as well as his actions in the game, not forgetting the magnified features of the game world itself, paints a narrative that condemns the US government, particularly the way it has dealt with drug crime, resulting in all but juridical segregation of the Black population in inner cities, while creating tyrannical forces to oppress them even further. This is the satirical message of *San Andreas*.

With this thesis I have aimed to contribute to the discussion of Blackness as well as the form of satire in video games. Regarding the discussion on *San Andreas*, I have provided a framework for the analysis of just how the satirical portrayal is constructed in the game through its protagonist, environment and antagonist. I encourage researchers to view *San Andreas* in its historical context; as work that determined the representation of Blackness at a time when others would not. For further research, I encourage studying the elements of *San Andreas* that were not considered in this thesis due to the limited scope of the research, such as player agency, using the latest theories in the field of literature studies, for example digital humanities. As society navigates these aggressive times, when sensitivity of racial issues is regrettably on the decline, we should look towards works of satire of all forms to see our past mistakes and learn from them. As *San Andreas* pointed out over 20 years ago, while dealing with problems using ultimate force may seem favourable in the short term, it can lead to disastrous circumstances in the long term. It is genuine compassion that trumps governance by fear and anger, so that people of all backgrounds can live peacefully and prosper.

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