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## **Grand Theft Video: Running and Gunning for the US Empire**

by Dennis Redmond

Comedy, as a famous saying goes, is a loaded gun – pointing it in the wrong direction can be fatal. What stamps Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto 3* trilogy (*Liberty City* (2000), *Vice City* (2002), and *San Andreas* (2004)) as a landmark in the videogame culture, however, is its devastatingly accurate sense of humor. While other games outshone *Grand Theft Auto 3* in areas such as control systems or visual effects, none could match the series’ intoxicating blend of open-ended game-play, outrageous action sequences, and uproarious satire. In an epoch of nightmarish political regression, Rockstar gave the world the comic relief it desperately needed, by staging a prison-break from the jail-house of the US Empire.

This is a remarkable achievement, considering the game industry’s chronic inability to develop a funnybone. Game companies are notorious for churning out legions of formulaic shooters, soporific driving simulations, hackneyed role-playing games and lead-footed crime thrillers. Yet *Grand Theft Auto 3* somehow fused the intensity of the shooter, the kinetic energy of the racing game, the immersive questing of the role-playing game, and the cat-and-mouse suspense of the gangster tale into a new kind of urban action game. The result deserves the name “grand theft video”, due its capacity to parody, pastiche and subvert vast swathes of the mainstream media culture.

The key to Rockstar’s success was its willingness to shine a spotlight on the dank underbelly of the US Empire. One of the most astonishing realities of US society during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has been the mass incarceration of its own citizens. Currently, more than 5 million Americans are in jail, prison or on parole in the self-proclaimed land of the free. This is a population larger than the entire prison population of the rest of the planet.

By contrast, *Grand Theft Auto 3*’s fundamental narrative premise is the almost unlimited freedom of its game-world – which includes the freedom to escape from the Empire’s jails, over and over again. The result is one of the great mass media burns on that Empire ever created, a pungent social satire refreshingly free of heavy-handed bombast or hairshirt moralizing.

This is not to say that the series is above criticism. For all of its achievements, it also has some glaring weaknesses. These include occasionally clunky controls, repetitive mission levels, meandering storylines and a complete lack of credible female characters. Still, it’s worth asking why Rockstar succeeded so brilliantly, precisely where so many other game companies failed.

Part of the credit belongs to the game designers at DMA, a quirky game studio based in Scotland, Great Britain. DMA’s first two versions of the game, *Grand Theft Auto* (1997) and *Grand Theft Auto 2* (1999), pioneered many of the interactive elements of the *Grand Theft Auto 3* series, but experienced limited success due to their 2D interface. *Grand Theft Auto 3* was the first true 3D version of the game, and its runaway success in 2000 led Rockstar to buy DMA outright in 2001.

More often than not, the sale of a game company signals the death-knell of its creative life. Rockstar is to be commended for bucking the trend, and investing the post-production resources necessary to flesh out the promise of DMA's original scenario.

Perhaps Rockstar's biggest coup was delivering just the right game, at just the right time, to just the right audience. For most of the 1990s, the only games capable of rendering large-scale 3D worlds required expensive personal computers. As a result, the most innovative 3D games were developed for the personal computer market – most famously, id Software's *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1995-1997) games, as well as Valve's magnificent *Half Life* (1998).

All this changed, thanks to the arrival of the Playstation 2, X-box and Gamecube consoles in 2000-2001. Suddenly, for a fraction of the cost of a high-end computer, millions of consumers could play 3D games equal to or superior to anything the personal computer could offer.

Rockstar seized this window of opportunity to do three things which no game firm had done before. First, its designers expanded the concept of playable game-worlds pioneered by Nintendo's classic Mario and Zelda franchises, and honed to perfection by Valve's *Half Life* and Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear* franchise. The virtual cities of *Grand Theft Auto 3* pulsate with real-time traffic, realistic weather effects, and impromptu conversations with passersby. While large open areas made most other games slow and tedious, Rockstar cleverly built vehicle movement into its game-world, creating a virtual space large enough to be drivable, but detailed enough to be walkable.

Second, Rockstar filled its game-worlds with citations from a dazzling array of other mass media, ranging from the Hong Kong martial arts thriller to the world music industry. For example, *Liberty City* parodies the Mafia epic and the action buddy film, *Vice City* borrows from the sound-track and set-design of the *Miami Vice* TV series and the cocaine gangster movie, while *San Andreas* pastiches the early 1990s gangbanger film and early 1990s hip hop.

Third, Rockstar took the open source software revolution to heart, by privileging public over proprietary game-space. Surprising as it sounds, *Grand Theft Auto 3*'s game-worlds contain not a single iota of real-world advertising. All of the vehicles, ads, and corporate icons featured in the game are parodies or fabrications. Even the one seeming exception, namely Rockstar's own logo, turns out to prove the rule: the logo signals nearby bonus items to players.

Individually, each of these changes marked a significant advance. Collectively, they sparked a revolution in gaming. Simply, most videogames depict static worlds, through which players have to move. But *Grand Theft Auto 3* created a world which moves along with its players. This sounds simple, but creating such a world is fiendishly difficult.

The reason is that showing a world is very different from making it playable. Surprisingly few of the tools and techniques developed by filmmakers and video artists work well in videogames, mostly because games are driven by player interaction rather than image or sound selection. Game designers have learned to compensate by limiting the on-screen action to a single memorable building or structure. The wondrous opening sequence of Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid 2* (2001), for example, showcases Snake against the silvery girders of New York's George Washington bridge, while the explosive finale of *Max Payne* takes place inside the glass-and-steel vault of the fictional Aesir corporate tower.

Rockstar's solution to this problem was ingenious. Rather than trying to duplicate

a real city with millions of cars and individuals, its game designers reduced the problem to manageable size in two ways. First, they divided a single city into recognizable neighborhoods, often based on real-world urban districts. For example, *Liberty City* features a New York-style Chinatown, a Little Italy, and various lower-class, middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods. Similarly, *Vice City* has Miami's Cuban and Haitian neighborhoods, and resort and beach districts, while *San Andreas* offers San Francisco's hills and Golden Gate bridge, Los Angeles' Watts Towers and freeways, and Las Vegas' casinos and desert landscape.

Second, Rockstar's designers linked these neighborhoods with dense networks of roads, pathways and transport systems. Because the game software could not realistically depict the images of more than a handful of cars and trucks, let alone the tens of thousands of people in urban crowds, *Grand Theft Auto 3* compensated by filling in these networks with layers of sound.

Where other games have eyes, *Grand Theft Auto 3* has ears. Fenders snap, engines roar, horns honk, trains clack, engines roar, passersby shout, helicopters chop, and tires screech, sometimes all at once. These sound-layers are accompanied by sound-cues, ranging from footsteps and car horns to travel noise and weather effects, which help to orient players in the game-world. *Grand Theft Auto 3* also employs silence to good effect, particularly on stealth missions.

This is especially remarkable, considering that sound-design has been the perennial Achilles heel of the videogame culture. For decades, game designers have focused more on graphical effects than on auditory ones. The honorable exception has been Shigeru Miyamoto, who has always managed to balance Nintendo's stylish in-game visuals with some of the most memorable sound-tracks in videogame history. It's also worth noting that all of the truly great videogames of the early 2000s, ranging from Remedy's *Max Payne* to Capcom's *Devil May Cry*, have followed in Miyamoto's footsteps, by making their sound-tracks an integral part of their game-worlds.

In essence, Rockstar's designers retrofitted the visuals of American place with the acoustics of multinational space. The result was an unprecedented fusion of game-play freedom with real-time intensity. As a player, you can go anywhere you please, any time you like. You can drive, steer, and pilot hundreds of vehicles (a miniature on-screen map helps you navigate the city). You can listen to any sound-track you wish, on several in-game radio stations. Passersby react to your presence, friends will aid you and enemies will chase you, and so forth.

It's important to stress that while Rockstar's game-world is extraordinarily immersive, this is not because it is even remotely realistic. Paradoxically, it succeeds precisely because it is so utterly *unrealistic*. For example, there are no traffic jams, streets are far wider than in real life, cars routinely slam into each other and fall to pieces, and above all, you are given the completely unrealistic (but astonishingly exhilarating) freedom to fail.

There are usually several ways of completing a mission or assignment, and players are given plenty of opportunities to acquire specific skills such as flying a plane or learning to swim. If you don't complete a mission, there's no penalty – just reequip and try again. Even your character's occasional demise in a fiery car-wreck signals nothing more onerous than a trip to the emergency room. You reappear outside the game-world's hospital, a little lighter in the wallet but hopefully wiser for wear. There is no "game over" in *Grand Theft Auto 3*, there is just gaming.

This openness also applies to your player-character's actions. It is true that you

can play the role of the villain, and assault and rob innocent civilians. But you pay a price. The police will chase you, forcing you to either bribe them or pay money to disguise your vehicle. It's much easier to earn money legitimately as a taxi driver, courier, firefighter or medic. The fundamental lesson of the game is that small-time crime doesn't pay, only hard work and meticulously-planned heists against the real criminals – the ones which infest penthouses and corporate boardrooms – do.

One of the greatest achievements of *Grand Theft Auto 3* is its unflinching satire of two of the most noxious political ideologies of those boardrooms, namely market fundamentalism (also known as neoliberalism) and its dim-witted provincial cousin, petro-fundamentalism.<sup>1</sup> Money, in Rockstar's far-from-satirical game-world, can buy just about anything – guns, police protection, and occasionally entire governments.

The only thing money cannot buy is the loyalty of the in-game radio stations. These stations are truly one of the high points of the *Grand Theft Auto 3* series, mixing live skits, talk radio parodies, and bogus advertisements with a slew of top tier musical hits from the 1980s and 1990s. The result is an unprecedented burn on the US consumer culture, a mediatic Molotov cocktail which torches everything from get-rich-quick hucksters to sleazy neoconservative politicians.

Much of the credit for *Liberty City's* sound-track goes to Craig Conner and Stuart Ross, who created and mixed many of the tracks. Particularly impressive is reggae station K-JAH, which samples a highly underrated 1981 album, *Scientist Rids the World of the Evil Curse of the Vampires*, mixed by legendary producer Henry "Junjo" Laws. The hip hop station, Game Radio FM, features hip hop artists such as Royce Da 5'9" (the Detroit rap artist who co-wrote the superb "Bad Meets Evil" track on Eminem's *Slim Shady LP*). In a nod to the 1980s gangster movies, the Flashback 95.6 station plays songs featured on Brian DePalma's *Scarface*. Meanwhile, the Chatterbox FM station features one uproarious sketch after another, co-written by real life US radio star Lazlow Jones and Rockstar's own Dan Houser.

*Grand Theft Auto 3* reaches its pinnacle in *Vice City*, which plays off its sparkling sound-track against every 1980s visual cliché in the book, from pastel clothing to the *Miami Vice* TV show. The play-list is astounding, covering hits as diverse as Nena's "99 Luftballons" and the Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star" to Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean." Station V-rock features classic heavy metal by Ozzie Osbourne and David Lee Roth, Motley Crue and others, while the Wildstyle station showcases the earliest hip hop tracks of Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and Run DMC. There is also an R&B station and a Latin music station, featuring classics by Tito Puente and others.

The talk radio sequences are truly priceless. Station KCHAT features side-splitting interviews with a fictional heavy metal band, Love Fist (several in-game missions involve getting this band into – and out of – trouble). Meanwhile, VCPR (Vice City Public Radio) offers a hilariously snide send-up of National Public Radio. One of the funniest sketches is an interview with a corrupt and sleazy Far Right politician named Alex Shrub (voiced by Chris Lucas), a patent reference to a certain real-life Southern political dynasty we could all name.

*Vice City* is *Grand Theft Auto 3* at its smartest, savviest and most politically astute. Unfortunately, this also marks the point when the franchise begins to go into decline. This is surprising, considering that the next installment of the series, *San Andreas*, has some of the most extensive environments and the most varied missions to date. There are now three cities to explore instead of just one, and large outdoor areas to swim, climb and fly through. *San Andreas* also broke new ground by introducing the first

African American player-character of the series, Carl Johnson or “CJ” (superbly voiced by Young Maylay). In fact, the game has one of the most multicultural roster of characters, music and environments ever assembled in a videogame. K-JAH makes a welcome return, and there are early 1990s techno, dance and Latin music stations, brimming with dazzling hip hop tracks from Big Daddy Kane, Public Enemy, Cypress Hill, Ice Cube and Kid Frost. Even the radio sketches by Lazlow Jones and Dan Houser are as mordantly funny as ever.

Yet despite moments of gravity-defying zaniness, *San Andreas* has a number of gnawing structural limitations. Prime among these is *Grand Theft Auto 3*'s stereotypical male characters, as well as its tendency to privilege specific aspects of American place over the narrative possibilities of multinational space. This was less of an issue in *Liberty City*, due to the low profile of Claude Speed, the game's player-character, and the endless variety of missions. In *Vice City*, Ray Liotta's fine voice-acting and the game's inexhaustible storehouse of 1980s media quotations paper over this contradiction. In *San Andreas*, however, the simmering tension between American place and multinational space erupts with the irresistible force of the 1991 Los Angeles uprising, the key event cited by the conclusion of the game.

CJ, the main character of *San Andreas*, is an ex-gangbanger trying to clean up his life and his crack-riddled neighborhood. He is forced to take on the Establishment, however, after being framed by crooked cops. The main storyline follows CJ's running battle with Tenpenny (voiced by Samuel Jackson), a corrupt African American cop implicated in the murder of CJ's mother. Eventually CJ acquires friends and allies from outside his community, ranging from Mexican-American Cesar to Chinese-American Woozie (Wu Zi Mu), as well as sympathetic white allies such as Mike Toreno. This is very much in keeping with the corporate multiculturalism of the late 1990s, namely the ideology of a family-friendly, ethnically diverse capitalism which glosses over the monstrous realities of US racism with slick multicultural marketing.

One of *San Andreas*'s great achievements is to peel off the layers of this marketing, revealing the cauldron of violence beneath. By the same token, perhaps its greatest limitation is its inability to depict the true source of that violence, namely the US Empire. We noted previously that five million US citizens are in jail, in prison or on parole. This outrageous number has an even more outrageous corollary: 44% of all inmates are African American. A report by Human Rights Watch calculated that one out of every ten African American men between the ages of 20 to 29 is incarcerated in the US. The primary reason, notes the report, is racial disparities in the sentencing of drug offenders – a polite way of saying, carceral racism.<sup>2</sup>

The social roots of this racism can be traced back to the political triumph of neoliberalism in the late 1970s, which smashed trade unions, razed the US industrial base, and enriched the few at the expense of the many. While the rich flourished as never before, real hourly wages for the vast majority of Americans either stagnated or fell.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, the prison boom has been a diabolically effective way of scapegoating the victims of neoliberalism. Instead of taxing the rich or funding education for all, the government's resources are increasingly limited to jailing the poor and funding obscene colonial wars.

The fundamental narrative dilemma facing *San Andreas* is that CJ's quest for personal redemption cannot serve as a template of collective resistance to neoliberalism. To be sure, there are moments which hint at such a possibility. The “Reuniting the Families” episode of the game depicts a Black Panther-style neighborhood uprising,

crushed by brutal repression and internal betrayal. One could also point to CJ's belated rescue of Madd Dogg (voiced by legendary rap artist Ice-T), or CJ's mission to help Cesar reclaim control of the Latino neighborhood, as examples of multicultural solidarity.

But these tantalizing possibilities are never fleshed out with actual game-play. One could easily imagine missions where the street gangs unite to fight Los Santos' power-elites, or where CJ becomes the ally of the social movements of Central and Latin America.

That said, it would be unfair to dismiss CJ as Bojangles with a shotgun. He is simply the latest iteration of the depoliticized, mainstream late 20<sup>th</sup> century African American media star, in the lineage from Richard Roundtree's Shaft in the 1970s to the eponymous Mr. T in the 1980s, and finally to Laurence Fishburne's Morpheus in the *Matrix* trilogy.

It doesn't have to be this way. Videogames ranging from *Max Payne* to *Devil May Cry* have found creative ways to outflank and defuse the noxious racism, sexism and other malignant identity-politics which permeate the mass media, usually by means of a subversive geopolitics.<sup>4</sup> For example, Rockstar's game designers could have accessed the rich archives of independent African American film. Given the early 1990s setting of *San Andreas*, this could include everything from Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971) and Sidney Poitier's revisionist Western, *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), all the way to Charles Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

In fairness to Rockstar, some of the most interesting incidental characters do hint at independent and non-US media genres. Catalina is a nod in the direction of the Zapata film, The Truth alludes to the counter-cultural film and paranoid thriller, Zero refers to the hacker movies, while sight-challenged Woozie is the Chinese-American version of Zatoichi, the legendary blind Japanese swordmaster who stars in countless Japanese films (including a superb contemporary remake by Takeshi Kitano).

Perhaps the closest *San Andreas* comes to its own self-critique is the figure of Mike Toreno, the sleazy national security agent. Toreno is the rough equivalent of Bill Clinton, someone who understands the language and mentality of the streets, while faithfully serving neoliberalism. Some of the best and most revealing dialogue in *San Andreas* takes place at the beginning of the "Stowaway" mission:

*CJ is at the airfield. Three cars and a plane arrive at the airstrip.*

Toreno: "Listen, Carl. We've got a problem. Some traitors from another department think they can help the 'overseas situation' by financing militaristic dictators in exchange for arms contacts."

CJ: "Hey, ain't that exactly what you do?"

Toreno: "Well, kind of, but we get to pick our dictators. Degenerates that we can control. We try to stay the hell away from these guys with principles, because that just – muddies the waters."

CJ: "Yeah, OK."

Toreno: "OK, so of course these idiots have stolen a consignment of land mines and they plan to offload them in the Middle East, and cause a little ruckus..."

*Rambling:* "And everybody goes crazy and has a lot of problems..." *Returns to point:* "Carl, do you like maiming people? Just curious..."

CJ: *nonplussed:* "Maiming? Some people, shit..."

Toreno: "Anyway, the point is – you and me, Carl, we're the same. Now yeah, it's

a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it. But if you screw this up, it causes a tinderbox situation all over Latin America and the Middle East. Now look, I spoke to the big man. You've got clearance to eliminate these fuckers. How's that?"

CJ: "Huh, man, kill Government agents?"

Toreno: *flippant*: "Kill, schmill. Come on... don't look at it that way, will you? Think of it as pest control. It works for me."

Pest control, indeed! This ironic inversion of the social history of the US Empire into natural history does briefly unmask the US Government as the ultimate bug-eyed monster of science fiction lore. But that's as far as *San Andreas* can take us. Behind the mask of the space alien and the self-promoting hype of Mike Toreno lurk the meathook realities of the big business interests who control big government, thanks to a political system which runs on literally billions of dollars of campaign expenditures.

Yet if *San Andreas* cannot tell us what comes after the US Empire, it does at least offer invaluable clues as to where the videogame culture is headed. Two episodes, in particular, stand out as the shape of things to come. "Just Business" features a thrilling, seamless admixture of first-person and drive-by action, while "Reuniting The Families" fuses deft action sequences with a marvelous on-the-fly reference to Neil Manke's legendary *They Hunger* maps for the *Half Life* engine.<sup>5</sup>

At their most frenetic, these sequences do anticipate a real world geopolitical conflict being waged with vehicles and on roads, and located inside urban spaces. This is the deadly urban warfare raging in Iraq, where a ragtag guerilla movement, armed with little more than improvised explosive devices, rocket-propelled grenades, and an indomitable will, is successfully pinning down the mightiest military machine in human history.

Yet if the next generation of urban action videogames is ever to fulfill the glittering promise of the *Grand Theft Auto 3* series, they must reach beyond the smog-choked highways, overflowing prisons and monstrous colonial wars of the US Empire. They must create multinational spaces with a truly post-American sense of place. To do so, they must be willing to confront their own micropolitical limitations. In a nutshell, the urban action game needs to grow. It must reach far beyond the bounds of the US, and include more cities, more countries, more media, and even more transport systems than ever before. Ultimately, the urban action genre can remain true to itself only by daring to transcend itself.

## Endnotes

1. For a more complete discussion of the relationship between neoliberalism and petro-fundamentalism, see my essay *S11: The Day the Empire Died* at <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/S11.html>.

2. "The national war on drugs has perhaps been the primary factor behind the extraordinary rates at which blacks are incarcerated. Drug offenses account for nearly two out of five of the blacks sent to state prison. More blacks are sent to state prison for drug

offenses (38 percent) than for crimes of violence (27 percent). In contrast, drug offenders constitute 24 percent of whites admitted to prison and violent offenders constitute 27 percent.

African-Americans are arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned for drug offenses at far higher rates than whites. This racial disparity bears little relationship to racial differences in drug offending. For example, although the proportion of all drug users who are black is generally in the range of 13 to 15 percent, blacks constitute 36 percent of arrests for drug possession. Blacks constitute 63 percent of all drug offenders admitted to state prisons. In at least fifteen states, black men were sent to prison on drug charges at rates ranging from twenty to fifty-seven times those of white men.” Human Rights Watch. *Incarcerated America*, April 2003.

<<http://www.hrw.org/background/usa/incarceration/>>

3. For further details of the US prison boom, see Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003. For the best single analysis of the self-serving ideological fictions and cruel economic realities of US neoliberalism, see Doug Henwood, *Wall Street*. New York: Verso, 1997. Finally, the Economic Policy Institute has irrefutable and voluminous evidence of the decline in US real wages since 1973. See Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto, *The State of Working America 2004-2005*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

4. Remedy’s *Max Payne* (2001) cagily linked Payne’s personal tragedy back to the agency of the villainous multinational corporation. This permitted Payne’s running battles through the tenements, docks, factories, and office towers of the multinational marketplace to represent one of the most remarkable allegories of multinational class struggle ever created. (For a fuller explanation of *Max Payne*, see <<http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/PP7.html>>). There is a strikingly similar transformation of a subversive geopolitics into a radical micropolitics in Capcom’s *Devil May Cry* trilogy, the premier occult-action franchise for the Playstation 2. Dante, the protagonist of the series, is the quicksilver negation of the bemuscled American superhero. *Devil May Cry 3* goes so far as to map out the space of a progressive East Asian geopolitics, capable of fighting East Asia’s state-guided and keiretsu capitalisms on their own turf. No such leap from quantity to quality occurs in the *Grand Theft Auto 3* series.

5. This is the moment when a cop briefly lands on the trunk of your vehicle, just as your gun jams. This alludes to a similar moment in Manke’s horror fiction trilogy, when a zombified police officer slips and falls on the ground, and gets up. Fortunately, the player-character is saved at the last second by a helpful helicopter blade. For a fuller explanation of Neil Manke’s contribution to the 3D videogame, see <<http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/PP6.html>>.

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*To Sleep with Anger*. Dir. Charles Burnett. SVS Films, 1990.