This article investigates the Grand Theft Auto videogame series in order to demonstrate the potential of a folkloristic, ethnographic approach for the analysis of digital games. I discuss Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas as a story collection, a frame for performance, a virtual museum of vernacular culture, and a widely circulated pop culture artifact whose double-voiced aesthetic has given rise to diverse interpretive communities. This case study suggests that digital gameplay should be regarded as a form of performance practice with the capacity to invoke traditional folkloric genres and engender new traditions.

A little girl asks, “Uncle Ricky? Would you read us a bedtime story, please, oh please?” He replies, “All right, you kids get to bed, I’ll get the storybook. Y’all tucked in? … Once upon a time, not long ago / When people wore pajamas and lived life slow...”

The story he tells is a fable of urban violence and bad choices, about “a little boy who was misled” and fell into a life of crime. An action-packed play-by-play relates the climactic episode in this young man’s life: he robs an undercover cop, escapes by pulling a gun, runs around the block, knocks over an old man in his haste, dashes into an abandoned building where he gets another gun from a filthy drug addict, heads outside to steal a car, crashes it into a tree, escapes from the wreckage, takes a pregnant woman hostage but lets her go, and runs again but is soon surrounded and shot by the police. The moral: “This ain’t funny, so don’t you dare laugh / Just another case about the wrong path / Straight and narrow or your soul gets cast. Good night!”

Slick Rick’s hip-hop cautionary tale is titled “Children’s Story” (Walters 1988). His laid-back, matter-of-fact delivery runs over a jumpy, menacing keyboard loop, the melody lifted from the bass line of Bob James’s “Nautilus” (1974). Smooth jazz becomes sharp counterpoint, an itchy, edgy trigger finger. The subject matter is not unusual for late 1980s rap, but as it comes over the radio I’m startled into attention because Uncle Ricky seems to be telling my own story. Just moments ago, I foolishly robbed a pedestrian in front of a police officer, had to run “top speed til [I] was out of breath,” accidentally knocked over a passing old lady, sought cover in an abandoned building to get my bearings, emerged to steal the nearest car, smashed it up and had to jump from the wreck, and finally found myself surrounded by police gunfire. After I was flattened by the hail of bullets, however, I survived to find myself outside a hospital (with cash...
diminished and weapons gone). I carjacked some yuppie so I could get home, and it is his car’s radio that is playing “Children’s Story.” As I drive, Slick Rick recounts the story that I have just performed, locating that performance within a particular narrative tradition: that of the violent, engaging, and often disturbing world of gangsta rap, whose storytellers trade in exaggerated portraits of urban street life coupled with trenchant critiques of contemporary society (Quinn 2005).

Once upon a time, not long ago, a company called Rockstar Games created an incredibly popular videogame series called Grand Theft Auto. My opening “ethnographic moment” is drawn from my experience with the most recent major release in this series, Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar Games 2004a; see Table 1). San Andreas is a fictional American state, clearly modeled on the West Coast of the United States in terms of its geography, architecture, climate, demographics, and popular culture. The gameworld features three major cities separated by rural towns and deserts: Los Santos (Los Angeles), San Fierro (San Francisco), and Las Venturas (Las Vegas), all frozen in the year 1992. My fieldworker’s claim to direct experience of this terrain is complicated by the fact that it wasn’t really me robbing pedestrians and jacking cars—it was my avatar, Carl Johnson, a twenty-something African American man whom I was maneuvering through the mean streets of 1992 Los Santos. Carl, who is nicknamed CJ, hails from Grove Street in Ganton, a poor black neighborhood that stands in for L.A.’s Compton. It should be noted that 1992 was a watershed year for Los Angeles: that spring a jury acquitted the four police officers involved in the videotaped beating of Rodney King, sparking riots. Similar events transpire late in the game’s storyline, when a corrupt police officer gets off easy and Los Santos goes up in flames. Named for California’s major geological fault, San Andreas dwells on faultlines in American culture.

San Andreas’s narrative is driven by CJ’s personal circumstances, both material and emotional. The player first meets him in the Liberty City (New York) airport; he has lived on the East Coast for five years but must return home to Grove Street for the funeral of his mother, who was murdered under mysterious circumstances. When this prodigal son arrives in Los Santos, he is greeted by city police, who rough him

<table>
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<tr>
<th>GAME</th>
<th>GAMEWORLD</th>
<th>AVATAR</th>
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<tr>
<td>GTA III (2001)</td>
<td>Liberty City (a fictional New York, circa 2001)</td>
<td>unnamed small-time crook (white male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice City (2002)</td>
<td>Vice City (a fictional Miami, circa 1986)</td>
<td>Tommy Vercetti (Italian-American mafioso)</td>
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These three games were designed as a loosely connected trilogy. They are the most widely played games in the GTA series and the only ones released for three different gaming platforms (Microsoft Windows–based PC, Sony’s PlayStation 2, and Microsoft’s Xbox).
up, steal his money, let him know they are framing him for the murder of another
police officer, and throw him out of their squad car to fend for himself in rival gang
territory. At this point, the player first gains control of CJ’s movements. One’s first
task is to get him onto a BMX bike and laboriously pedal through a disorienting,
threatening urban landscape to reach his childhood home in Ganton/Compton. From
there, CJ reunites with siblings and friends and returns to life with the Grove Street
Families gang—fighting rival gangs to expand territory, beating up drug dealers who
are destroying the neighborhood, and sometimes doing the bidding of the Los San-
tos police, who have him in a tough spot.

Like its mega-hit predecessors Grand Theft Auto III (2001) and Grand Theft Auto:
Vice City (2002), San Andreas has been widely praised for its flexible narrative structure.
While there is a large-scale plot arc—which is oriented around the death of CJ’s moth-
er, the manipulative dealings of corrupt cops and government agents, and the chang-
ing fortunes of various families and gangs—there is no strict order for completion of
the missions that will advance this story. At any given moment in the game, players
can choose among several different goal-oriented tasks: for example, rescuing a fam-
ily member held captive by a rival gang, winning a low-rider race through the streets
of Los Santos, stealing weapons from a National Guard armory, or sneaking through
a rapper’s mansion to steal his book of rhymes for a friend. These missions are framed
by “cut-scenes”—filmlike segments where the player cannot control the avatar’s move-
ments—that allow for the presentation of extended dialogue, narrative exposition,
and character development. But one may also opt to set the missions aside and simply
wander through the impressive expanses of the gameworld. Steal a vehicle—take your
pick! fast ones or slow ones, sports cars, SUVs, semitrucks, or motorcycles—turn on
the radio, and cruise along beautiful beachfront highways. Or get a gun and shoot
pedestrians to see what useful items they are carrying—money or weapons—until the
police take notice and you wind up arrested or injured.

This flexibility is reined in by one crucial constraint: CJ is the only avatar available.
In many videogames, players can choose among a wide array of characters or custom-
built an avatar from scratch, choosing gender, race, physical attributes, and sometimes
skill sets. This freedom to experiment with one’s identity has been at the heart of most
existing ethnographic work on cyberspace and digital gameplay. Scholars have been
especially attentive to massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), in which players
create distinctive avatars and use them to develop complex relationships with other
participants (Bartle 1996; Morris 2004; Taylor 2006; cf. Fine 1983). But there is no such
interaction in San Andreas, nor even a choice of persona: every player must wear the
shoes of a particular young black man who finds himself in a particularly trying situ-
ation. When I said the violent protagonist in my lurid opening story “wasn’t really me,”
it might have seemed like an abdication of responsibility—after all, who made CJ com-
mit those acts if not the player at the controls? But in an important sense it really wasn’t
me—not just because no real shots were fired but because this gameworld and its nar-
ratives revolve around CJ’s race, gender, acquired abilities, family background, and
other personal circumstances. From CJ’s neighborhood friends to the hostile Los San-
tos police, every character in San Andreas sees CJ as a young black man in gang colors;
we have ample cultural data to suggest that they would interact differently with a young
white woman dressed to give an academic lecture. For one thing, pedestrians would be unlikely to shout “Go back to Ganton!” if I were the one accidentally jostling them on the sidewalk.

As the much-anticipated final element of the trilogy that began with GTA III and Vice City, San Andreas was a tremendous commercial success. It sold over twelve million copies in its first four months on the market. In the United Kingdom, it was the fastest-ever million-selling videogame—meaning that about one in sixty people in the U.K. bought this game within nine days of its release (Adams 2005; Surette 2004). These figures are not unusual when it comes to popular music or movies, but games like San Andreas are less-casual purchases. They cost three or four times as much as new CD releases, a price-point justified by the buyer’s expectation of spending something like a hundred hours in the gameworld. Rockstar’s collected tales of early 1990s gangsta life are being received and performed on a grand scale, worldwide, by players who visit CJ’s world for hours at a time after dinner, before school, or between errands. If mass media, regulated time, and simultaneous experience tend to constitute dispersed “imagined communities,” as Benedict Anderson and so many others have argued (Anderson 1991), then the citizenry of San Andreas—its designers, its touristic players, and its digital permanent residents—would seem to be a Volk whose lore demands attention.

But why discuss San Andreas, or any videogame, under the disciplinary banner of folklore? I will argue that folkloristic work on performance, transmission, children’s games, and material culture offers essential tools for investigating digital gameplay. Folklorists’ approaches to the nature of storytelling and play are quite different from those of most digital game theorists; their ethnographic orientation, their experience with variable texts and performance practices, and their disciplinary emphasis on representations of the past in the present could bring new perspectives to this material. San Andreas presents a case study of special interest because it combines nostalgic idealization of an earlier era, intensely ironic political commentary, and gameplay that evokes children’s “cruel play” traditions in its brutality and inversions of social norms (Sutton-Smith 1983:109). In its nostalgic mode, San Andreas exemplifies the archaizing process through which “the repudiated is transvalued as heritage” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998b:298); the game’s designers researched and reproduced the vernacular speech, clothing, music, and expressive aesthetic of a particular urban youth culture at a particular historical moment. But in its ironic mode, which parodies American consumerism and stereotypes of ghetto life by using representational strategies appropriated from hip-hop, San Andreas suggests that this material is not yet “safe for preservation” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998b:298) but instead retains the capacity to provoke, alarm, or be judged offensively inauthentic.

In this article I will work through several different analytical paradigms for Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, addressing the game as a story collection, a performance context, a virtual museum of vernacular culture, and a pop culture artifact whose double-voiced aesthetic has given rise to diverse interpretive communities. I will also allude to San Andreas’s affinities with more traditional folkloric domains (through its narrative structure and its citation of African American oral traditions, for example). Numerous scholars have examined such relationships between folklore and
mass media products, from Disney’s versions of the Grimm tales to the playground behavior of children who create games and stories derived from TV shows and Super Mario Brothers. But while I will touch on these connections, my main goal is not a “motif-spotting” endeavor (Koven 2003:181) but a demonstration of how an interdisciplinary approach drawing on folklore studies might illuminate digital game design and gameplay as forms of cultural expression and sites of interpretive work by dispersed communities of players and critics.

The material that follows relies on now-common ethnographic sources from “technoculture”: online discussion forums, e-mail correspondence, and responses to a survey that I posted online. The survey focused on interactive aspects of San Andreas’s musical soundtrack (K. Miller 2007a), but I pursued more general gameplay topics in follow-up e-mail correspondence with the respondents. (As of this writing, I have received eighty-two survey responses from players in at least seven countries: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland. The majority are from North America, and 95 percent are men. Ages range fairly evenly from the late teens to the late thirties, with 43 percent self-identifying as students.) In addition to my Web-based fieldwork, I have undertaken participant-observation: I have played San Andreas alone in my living room, as most of my survey respondents do; I have played it with friends watching and commenting; I have watched others play; and I have conducted postplay interviews. All of my research was conducted between 2005 and 2007; face-to-face interviews and gameplay observation took place in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

In many respects my fieldwork has been quite traditional, and elsewhere I have drawn on it to construct a musical ethnography focused on San Andreas and its players (K. Miller 2007b). But my work has also led me to see gameworlds themselves as field sites. By this I mean not just that “fieldwork” is a fruitful metaphor for guiding scholarly analysis of virtual spaces but also that it actually characterizes players’ activities: when they visit the state of San Andreas, they are participant-observers in a culture not of their making. Their explorations blend touristic, ethnographic, and colonialist approaches: they evaluate the staged performances and scenery created for their amusement, they investigate the boundaries and social norms of the gameworld, and they gradually master new territory.

Before turning to players’ activities, however, some description of San Andreas’s narrative is in order. The game presents a collection of tales about a young black man from South Central Los Angeles, but it does so using narrative structures that bring to mind a much older compendium: the Grimm Märchen. A comparison to this classic folklore text will serve to introduce key aspects of San Andreas’s content, while also demonstrating both the potential and the limitations of a text-oriented approach to digital games.

Grove Street Grimm

My colleague David Kaminsky inspired the Grimm comparison with this gloss on some of my early San Andreas work: he wrote, “Violent and engaging stories for children that teach them modern myths and how to understand and fear the world
around them. Very Brothers Grimm” (e-mail communication, April 2006). After reading his comment, I began to think about how the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) game designers could be imagined as Grimm-like folklore collectors. To begin with an irresistible serendipity, two of the Rockstar Games founders are brothers: the Brothers Houser, Sam and Dan, two Scotsmen. They served as executive producer and producer of San Andreas, respectively; Dan Houser is also credited as a writer and audio director. More importantly, though, with San Andreas the Housers and their colleagues have drawn on diverse sources to produce a story collection with a striking family resemblance to the Grimm tales.

First, both the Grimm tales and the San Andreas missions were evidently chosen and edited “to create clear social types that exemplified moral conduct,” both positive and negative (Briggs 1993:393; cf. Bottigheimer 1987). CJ interacts with a suite of archetypal characters familiar from African American oral traditions, rap lyrics, and films like Boyz n the Hood (1991) and Friday (1995): the street philosopher Big Smoke, the trickster Ryder, the foolish OG Loc, the big brother/surrogate father Sweet (to whom CJ must prove himself), the corrupt authority figure Officer Tenpenny (whom CJ must outmaneuver), broken drug-addict slaves to be liberated from bondage, and capricious women to be courted. CJ himself is a classic folktales hero, from his initial family situation to his narrative trajectory. Maria Tatar describes the typical family drama of the Grimm tales, which “lines up hero against parent, then often puts the hero at a further disadvantage by allying siblings (usually of the same sex as the hero) with that parent” (2003:61). CJ’s father is absent throughout; his older brother aligns himself with their recently murdered mother and berates CJ for abandoning the family. Over the course of the game, CJ progresses “from an oppressed condition in the drab world of everyday life” (penniless in his broken-down neighborhood) “through a magical foreign realm” (the rural countryside and the surreal Las Venturas/Las Vegas) “to a shining new reality” in which he returns triumphant to his home territory (Tatar 2003:61). He is both a “victim” and “seeker” hero, in Tatar’s terms (following Vladimir Propp): “As a passive victim of circumstances, adventures befall him; as an active seeker of worldly glory, he embarks on a search with a specific goal” (62). Tatar notes that the two types can coexist in one character; here that combination of traits helps motivate the player as an active performer of the narrative. CJ begins as a victim, mourning his dead mother, harassed by the police, and brow-beaten by his older brother. It is the player’s job to animate him as a seeker.

CJ goes on a series of journeys in the course of his missions, during which he “helps needy creatures” and “obtains gifts from strange but helpful people”—defining traits of a Grimm plot (Zipes 2002:63). He saves a girl from a burning building, works to further a friend’s musical career, rescues a suicidal rapper, and undertakes many difficult tasks to protect his brother from harm. Along the way he encounters and forms alliances with all kinds of peculiar characters: a volatile woman who lives deep in the forest, a marijuana-growing mystic named The Truth, a Scottish hair-metal band, a BDSM-obsessed casino worker, and a blind Chinese man with magical prowess as a race car driver and videogame player. Eventually CJ makes a triumphant return to Los Santos with money, friends, and a developing career as the manager of a successful rap artist. In typical Grimm fashion, he is “the wandering protagonist [who] always leaves
home to reconstitute home” (Zipes 2006:70). But this initial happy ending is followed by a textbook “third act,” in which “the final trial the hero must endure is motivated by the reappearance of the fraternal rivals who vexed the hero in his earlier, preheroic days” (Tatar 2003:90). After CJ has passed many tests of skill and character, achieving wealth and respect, his brother denigrates his accomplishments and insists that he come back to his old neighborhood to rid it of drug dealers. The kingpin dealer is revealed to be a lifelong friend who bears responsibility for the death of CJ’s mother.

Analysis of the formal structure of *San Andreas* missions also suggests affinities with the Grimms’ work. In designing the flexible mission structure that is the hallmark of *GTA*, the Brothers Houser created miniature plot arcs characterized by “symmetrical repetitions of actions and episodes,” as in the märchen (Briggs 1993:395). For each mission, the player must receive instructions from another game character, drive to a specified location (perhaps picking up necessary tools along the way), and carry out a multistage set of tasks that concludes with a special musical tag and a congratulatory “Mission Passed!” screen title. During the missions, assorted magic objects “aid the hero in his struggle or protect him in times of danger” (Kamenetsky 1992:81); for example, a bouquet of flowers found by the roadside helps CJ seduce a woman, who in turn gives him a keycard that will help him rob a casino. These repetitive episodes create a scaffold for the large-scale plot of the game, which gradually unfolds through players’ choices in the course of performance.

Stylistic changes across the *GTA* series closely resemble those observed in successive editions of the Grimm collection, including “the replacement of indirect with direct speech, the addition of originally nonexistent dialogues, the addition of opening and closing as well as episode-connecting formulas and repetitions . . . and the equal distribution of dialect words and folk sayings” (Dégh 1979:89; cf. Zipes 2002:30). For example, while the protagonist of *GTA III* has no name or voice, *San Andreas*’s CJ is a developed character with an extensive personal backstory and plenty of dialogue, his voice provided by West Coast rapper Young Maylay (Chris Bellard). An increasing incidence of proverbs gave the Grimm tales “a more folksy texture” and aided the collection’s potential as “a showcase for German folk culture” (Tatar 2003:32); similarly, speech styles in *San Andreas* rely heavily on urban Black and Chicano idioms (which some players have trouble understanding if they turn off the default subtitles). In *San Andreas* the folksy aphorisms are deployed for ironic effect: early in the game a character tells CJ, “Like it says in the book, we are both blessed and cursed”—to which CJ replies, “What fucking book?” But sincere or not, such phrases enter the lexicon of the player community and circulate as signs of insider knowledge. When I googled “Like it says in the book, we are both blessed and cursed,” the top hit was for a personal Web site where one can download the custom cars a player has designed for use in the PC version of *San Andreas.*

In the Grimm collection and the game, these design practices tend to create “a set of neatly bounded texts that are tightly woven together intertextually” (Briggs 1993:395). With its narrative coherence and repetitive formal structure, *San Andreas* emerges as something very like Dégh’s vision of the märchen: “a stylistically and ideologically standardized storybook, [which] reinforced earlier narratives and influenced the formulation and the maintenance of the tales in both oral and liter-
ary circulation” (1979:84). GTA’s potential for influence only dates back a few years, of course, and its cultural longevity is impossible to predict. As Brenda Danet writes of digital “folk art,” however, “the Internet speeds up not only the exchange of individual messages, but also the evolution of complex social processes” (2001:352). The series has already inspired the formation of dozens of online player communities. And if San Andreas seems an unworthy candidate for folkloristic analysis, remember that the Grimm collection was also a mass-produced media product. Like today’s videogames, it gathered a dispersed audience around a common experience. Indeed, Tatar’s assessment of the tales would not be out of place in a contemporary monograph on digital media: “Cutting across the borderlines between high art and low, oral traditions and print culture, the visual and the verbal, they function as robust nomadic carriers of social practices and cultural values” (2003:xv).

Finally, these texts are marked by their engagingly gruesome details. In both San Andreas and the Grimm märchen, the awful is the everyday, recounted with moral force. These are worlds “where taboos may still be in force but where transgression is the motor of the plot” (Tatar 2003:56). When you shoot someone in San Andreas, the virtual bystanders run away screaming; if you do it in front of a police officer, you acquire a “wanted” rating and will be pursued by squad cars. “Freedom” is far from absolute, and familiar social norms govern the logic of the gameworld—from crime and punishment to entrepreneurship and dating rituals.

In terms of narrative, then, San Andreas is a compendium of startling yet canonical tales arranged to support an epic plot arc that gives the player a reason to strive to complete all of the missions. It revolves around a familiar up-by-the-bootstraps story and builds its dramatic tension from the typical folktale set-up of missing parents and an oppressive sibling. That situation has special implications when the family in question is specifically black, urban, American, and poor; missing fathers, martyred mothers, structurally enforced poverty, and fraternal violence are all central tropes in political discourses about inner-city American life, by cultural insiders and outsiders alike. In developing these themes, the Rockstar staff relied on intertextual references: this folk-hero story is filled with citations of hip-hop culture, mafia movies, and contemporary American politics, along with cross-references to previous GTA games (Miller 2007b). For example, as Soraya Murray writes, “[t]he shift from a Scarface-inflected Vice City into San Andreas’s original gangsta theme is completely organic, since the hip-hop community heavily appropriated the narrative of Scarface [1983]. . . . [I]n the underdog, Carl Johnson, Rockstar achieves the copacetic melding of all these tropes” (2005:80).

Narrative analysis can provide rich insights into story-driven games, revealing resemblances across many genres of creative production. My own comparative findings might suggest that San Andreas’s broad appeal derives not only from its violence, impressive graphics, and action-packed missions but also from its satisfying structural affinities with classic children’s tales—here staged in the cultural world of Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story” rather than that of the Grimms. But if we move beyond the notion of the game as storybook and the Rockstar staff as writers/compilers, other folkloristic qualities of San Andreas come into view. Marilyn Motz has suggested that “[t]he essence of folklore is its inability to be duplicated, predicted, or
generalized. . . It is continually changing, local, culturally specific, concrete, and personal. It exists in and through its performance. Its meaning is metaphoric and symbolic, malleable, and multivalent. It is aural and kinesic as well as visual” (1998:348). These terms of reference beautifully illustrate the difference between reading a story collection and playing San Andreas: while both the game and the book are mass-produced texts, satisfying gameplay relies on the unique realization of this text through individual performance.

Gameplay, Narrative, and Performance

How is playing through a narrative different from recounting it or hearing it told? In Cybertext, an important early contribution to digital game theory, Espen Aarseth characterized the difference between conventional linear texts and “cybertexts” in terms of individual performative agency:

[When you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible; and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed. . . Trying to know a cybertext is an investment of personal improvisation that can result in either intimacy or failure. (1997:3–4)]

Aarseth’s work on “ergodic literature”—texts that require this sort of improvisatory investment—helped inform Gonzalo Frasca’s equally influential distinction between literary-theory-oriented “narratology” and game-theory-oriented “ludology” as the two major scholarly approaches to digital games (Frasca 1999; cf. Juul 2005:15). Ludologists concern themselves with the unique properties of games as distinct from narrative texts, including their variable outcomes and the effort they require from players. Juul’s definition foregrounds the qualities important to ludologists: “A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable” (2005:36).

This game model could have great potential as a frame for ethnographic work, but most ludologists—like most narratologists—have been more engaged with theory than performance practice. Digital-game scholars and game-design textbook authors frequently invoke Johann Huizinga’s notion of a “magic circle” (1955) that creates a sealed frame around a generalized gameplay experience: for example, “A game of Tetris . . . provides a formalized boundary regarding play: the game is either in play or it is not. Players of Tetris do not ‘casually interact’ with it; rather, they are playing a game” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004:n.p.; cf. Juul 2005:164–5). By contrast, scholars who have taken an ethnographic approach to traditional children’s games often focus on the porousness of that magic circle, the extent to which players muddy the distinction of being “either in play or not.” As Brian Sutton-Smith has observed, “we treat play too often as a separable text, when in fact it always exists complexly interacting with the various contexts—human and symbolic—of which it is a part.” As
with any performance, he suggests, we should be attentive to “the years of effort, practice, preparation, organization, and the multiplicity of learned moments that have gone into this production” (1995:283). Along these lines, Linda Hughes has shown how players “mold their games to the demands of social life,” asserting that the play episode makes a better unit of analysis than the game writ large (1995:93). These approaches put players’ experiences at the center, rather than formalist analysis of a game’s narrative or its rule-based structure.

For the ethnographically inclined, the ludologists’ emphasis on the improvisatory negotiation of unique paths through an established text or rule-based system might suggest connections to theories of oral transmission, ritual, and traditional games—all of which involve individual improvisation within specific constraints. Scholars in these areas routinely decry the notion that anonymous tradition-bearers just go through the motions required to replicate a certain cultural text; their work could help illustrate that videogame players aren’t automatons, either. For instance, we might use oral-formulaic theory to model players’ creative work as they string together episodic missions into different performances of what always counts as “the same” game. More generally, each episode of digital gameplay—each new realization of a game’s basic code—might be viewed as what Jeff Todd Titon calls a folkloric text, which always “exists in multiple versions and variants, similar to one another and thereby referencing one another,” resulting in an expressive form with “an emergent, processual character” (1995:439). Given the cultural setting of San Andreas, it seems appropriate to borrow a line from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s work on the Signifying Monkey tales to describe the improvisatory, unreplicable quality of the gameplay experience: “there is no fixed text of these poems; they exist as a play of differences” (1988:61).

Jay Mechling has addressed the nature of “playing through” a narrative in his work on the Boy Scout “Treasure Hunt” game. He argues that enacting the game’s narrative structure in the course of traveling across challenging terrain tends to create an intersensual experience that inculcates moral lessons about American culture (1984:24 cf. Kapchan 1995:483). Though the GTA player is sitting in front of a screen rather than fording a stream, the gameplay experience still has important intersensual dimensions. A detailed 3-D environment, the ambient sounds of city streets, music from in-game “radio stations” that feature dozens of real-life songs, and the dexterity challenges presented by the game controller all contribute to game “immersion,” a fundamental goal of digital-game design. As in the Boy Scout treasure hunt, the terrain itself constitutes a substantial part of the game challenge: its tricks and secrets must be learned, named, and mastered. From drive-by gang missions to a lengthy subplot about a casino heist, the stories recounted by San Andreas and performed by its players are fundamentally about controlling territory, acquiring authority over threatening and disorienting spaces. The virtual gameworld requires players to act out and internalize this narrative theme, in a process qualitatively different from reading or recounting a verbal narrative.

A terrain-based paradigm with heroic-quest and/or colonialist connotations has long informed our understanding of digital “new frontiers”—consider the Web browsers named Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, and Safari (cf. Fuller and Jenkins 1994). But CJ is an antihero, an anticolonist; his starting position is the postindustrial ghetto,
and his colonizing explorations are conducted under duress. His persona and backstory, indelibly marked by race and class, are the foundation of the player’s experience of place in San Andreas—particularly of safe versus threatening places. CJ has to come back to Grove Street in Ganton again and again, and in the course of those repetitions this broken-down, impoverished neighborhood rapidly comes to feel like a safe and comforting destination. In Ganton there is a house where CJ can rest, keep his belongings, and change clothes; there are plenty of young and old black people, including groups of young men wearing Grove Street gang colors; there are friends and family members who offer CJ jobs and reward him with money and increasing “respect” ratings. After only a few exploratory trips around Los Santos, I began to feel a wash of relief whenever I brought CJ back to Grove Street. The highway overpass and chain-link fences, the check-cashing place, the cars with mismatched doors, and the increasing number of black faces signaled safety.

For a young middle-class white woman like me, as for many San Andreas players, this was a novel way to experience a poor black urban landscape figured as “the ghetto.” It reshaped my sense of public space and public safety, including my response to the sight of police (who tend to harass CJ, with or without provocation). It added a visceral dimension to my intellectual understanding of racial profiling. Eric Gwinn, a self-identified “black gamer” who is a staff writer for the Chicago Tribune, anticipated this effect in a review of San Andreas: “[S]oon after the game begins, the police stop the cab you, as CJ, are traveling in to let you know they’re watching you. Are you being stopped because you’re black or because the cops want you to know that as a former gangbanger, you’re being watched? The answer is the latter. But for some players, the episode might cause a twinge, a glimpse into the mind of a black urban male” (Gwinn 2004). Art historian Soraya Murray has also remarked upon how Rockstar “has taken the poor black male body, which is encoded as a human stain on the fabric of a squeaky-clean American dream of opportunity, and pushed it into the center of our attention. . . . [T]hat shell upon which so many negative associations has been projected becomes a mirror for a thorny cluster of societal relations in America” (2005:80).

Performing San Andreas’s narratives in CJ’s body not only affects players’ experiences of the gameworld’s public space but also draws attention to this character’s speech style, mannerisms, and built-in skills—his programmed habitus, which is “capable of generating practices regulated without express regulation” (Bourdieu [1972] 1977:17). All digital-game avatars are encoded with a repertoire of competences that players explore and exploit. In my first play session, as CJ and I were trying to ride a bicycle, we accidentally jacked a passing car: pressing a single button on the controller yielded up a complicated and physically difficult series of motions that CJ accomplished with ease and grace, throwing the driver onto the pavement and taking his place behind the wheel. Other characters often remind CJ of his abilities, saying “Even you must remember . . . how to do this or that. They draw on a memory the player lacks: “Takes you back, doesn’t it, CJ?” someone asks after a high-speed BMX bike ride to escape enemy gang members. As I carry out my fieldwork in San Andreas, I can’t interview CJ about his nostalgia for the drive-bys of his adolescence, but I can bring him into particular situations and experiment with his hidden ca-
pacilities. CJ already knows how to fight, drive, dance, shoot, ride a bike, seduce a date, and talk trash. Notably, though—and in contrast to the previous GTA games—many of these skills improve with practice, implying that they are learned rather than innate. At the start of the game, CJ is a terrible driver, gets short of breath when he exerts himself, and can’t aim a weapon very well; as the player makes progress, the game controller becomes more responsive and CJ’s physical capabilities gradually improve. Given that this engineering advance appeared in the first GTA game with a non-white lead character, it could represent a kind of safety measure: it limits the game’s potential to reinforce racist conflations of blackness and natural-born criminality.

Encoded behaviors continually remind players that CJ has skills, physical capacities, memories, and inclinations different from their own. For example, the one-button carjack feature—common to all the GTA games—communicates the fact that the avatar is experienced with violence. This is a point of contrast with role-playing games, where players sometimes have to struggle not to “break character” by having their avatar act on their own knowledge: as Fine writes, “The character does not have the right to know what the performer knows, and must maintain a pose of pretended ignorance about that primary self” (1983:241). But CJ need not pretend. He doesn’t know who is at the controls, or even that there are controls. Meanwhile, the player can give CJ certain kinds of directives but cannot control the details of his story or the direction of his relationships with other characters; GTA’s code presents a performance situation more like a scripted stage play than a framework for open-ended role-playing.

Digital-game theorist Jesper Juul has offered a contrasting account of the one-button carjack: “In real life . . . entering a car is generally not considered a very interesting activity. . . . Since entering a car is ultimately an uninteresting detail in the larger world of Grand Theft Auto III, the simulation of that activity is reduced to the pressing of one button” (2005:170–2). Here a reflexive approach oriented around the performative experience of gameplay makes a substantial difference in the analysis. My own astonishment and pleasure at that first accidental carjack led me to think more about what it means for the avatar’s competences to be so radically different from the player’s. It’s safe to say that for the vast majority of GTA players, entering a car by throwing its driver into the street would indeed be a “very interesting” and unusual activity. The fact that it is a routine, automatic behavior for GTA avatars provides insight into the cultural world of the games, emphasizing that criminality is the norm: there is literally no other way for CJ to obtain his own vehicle early in the game. The practiced physical ease of the carjack also tells players that the identification between player and avatar is far from complete or transparent. As I provide the cues for virtual motions that I could not accomplish in my own body and did not design myself, I am aware of the perpetual tension between my performative agency and the encoded rules that govern CJ’s every gesture—rules derived both from CJ’s imagined past history as a character and from the kinds of tasks that the player must accomplish in the course of any GTA game.

Deborah Kapchan suggests that the repetitive aesthetic practices that constitute “performance” tend to invite questions as to “what is reproduced, or imitated, and
what is created and emergent.” CJ’s performative repertoire reproduces an actor’s movements—through the medium of motion-capture technology—and continually displays what Kapchan calls “stylistically marked expressions of otherness” (1995:479). As in other digital games, this stylized physicality creates a palpable gap between the performance of the avatar and that of the player; following Kapchan, we might ask who is responsible for the on-screen performance, who is engaged in imitation or reproduction, and what is being imitated? Derek Burrill addresses this issue by approaching an avatar’s motions as “a type of choreography” that may reflect more general “cultural choreographic practices,” particularly with respect to the representation of race and gender (2006:19). He notes that if the player leaves CJ standing somewhere without providing any input through the controller, CJ does not simply hold still: “A slight sway, breathing, and subtle head turning are accompanied by three ambient gestural sequences: shifting weight from one foot to another, bored and acheing for some action; swinging of the arms from side to side in an effort to ‘stay loose’; crossing and then uncrossing of the arms in a show of masculine bravado” (2006:33). Left alone a bit longer, CJ sings snippets of songs heard on the San Andreas radio; the game camera zooms through the back of his head to represent a shift to first-person perspective and he begins to look around. This eerie display of the avatar’s independence from the player forges a connection between players and producers. The game designers are the ghost in the CJ machine, and their hauntings mark the player’s experience as staged and prefigured. Someone else has compiled this collection of physical markers of urban, black, male being-in-the-world; the player is never the lead choreographer.

Millions of people have performed the GTA stories, always with the limiting mediation of a given avatar. While they have considerable improvisational freedom in their approach to the game, many of their experiences have been programmed to be reproducible. At the moment of my writing or your reading, thousands of people may well be hearing Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story” on the car radio as they race away from a series of events much like those he has recounted. This is an important difference from the “persistent worlds” of MMOGs or online social spaces like Second Life, where the virtual environment has an ongoing history and a continually shifting population. Every player experiences the storyline of San Andreas from the beginning, knowing that millions of others have done the same, and each person who finishes the final mission knows that she/he is graduating into a club of committed players who have also spent many hours in the gameworld. In the process, players develop “a system of mutual relevances” that encourages in-group communication and the formation of player communities oriented around various aspects of the games (Fine 1983:238). This is how any player earns “storytelling rights,” a sense of communicative entitlement and “ownership of experience” (Shuman 1986:18). As one player wrote in a survey response that praised GTA’s in-game radio stations, “Games should be all about having stories you can tell to other gamers and ‘I went straight off the boardwalk when I was trying to change off that god awful love songs station’ is a pretty good example” (Bob, Scotland, age 31–35; see K. Miller 2007a. I have cited players according to their preferences and have also included each player’s age bracket. Further discussion of the survey data may be found in K. Miller 2007b).
Because these performances take place in virtual versions of particular American cities at particular moments, the GTA games also invoke and reshape players’ understandings of real-world places, politics, and historical events. Playing GTA means playing with one’s sense of the past, experiences with pop culture, and ideas about America; one reviewer termed it “a bona fide sociological artifact, one that manages to effectively evoke a specific time and place in American history” (S. Jones 2004). Instead of a compendium of tales, then, we might imagine San Andreas as another kind of folkloristic enterprise: a museum of vernacular culture, where visitors engage with the narrative’s “play of differences” among extraordinary artifacts assembled into interactive exhibits.

The San Andreas Museum

What was urban American life like in 1992? Find out at the San Andreas Museum, where painstaking research and craftsmanship have gone into producing every detail of three West Coast cities trapped in time. Try on period clothes in a variety of styles—trained reenactors representing native inhabitants will comment on your look! Take any car you want and speed through the streets so you can see the reconstructed architecture from the same vantage point as real residents. While you’re cruising around town, listen to a dazzling variety of authentic musical genres on the radio, where the playlists have been curated and presented by such luminaries as George Clinton, Chuck D, Axl Rose, and Julio G—a real-life radio DJ who spun gangsta rap in California back in the day. Grab lunch at the Cluckin’ Bell or Pizza Stack, where actors representing apathetic teens will serve you the huge portions of high-fat fast food that were the main dining option for poor inner-city folk. The people you encounter will speak in a variety of slang styles, but their words will be subtitled for your convenience. What’s more, no one will know you’re a tourist! You’ll be stepping into the shoes of a San Andreas native, complete with family and friends. Discreet screen instructions will guide you in observing local customs, but feel free to behave however you want. (Even the police will treat you like a local, except you’ll never have to stay in the pen for long.)

Other museums tell you about the music, cuisine, clothes, dialects, and social systems of past cultures with wall placards and glassed-in exhibits of stuff you can’t touch. Only San Andreas puts you right in the action.

GTA’s designers were the curators of this virtual museum, and like most curators they were preoccupied both with reaching a certain public and with staying true to the spirit of the exhibited material. A videogame might not seem to bear a heavy burden in terms of representational accuracy and educational value, but the subject matter and setting of San Andreas imposed constraints on the Rockstar staff. First, a substantial segment of the game’s buyers would be in a position to assess the authenticity of its representation of 1992 West Coast culture; the game’s music, cars, clothes, and dialogue had to stand up to this scrutiny. In meeting this standard, the game acquired instructional force for those players who were not already connoisseurs of this material—it became a repository of canonical styles, songs, and slang. Second, the fact that CJ and most other characters are African American or Chicano gener-
ated considerable pressure on the game designers to avoid the appearance of racist caricature. In the run-up to the game’s release, industry writers often suggested that it might be a risky business for Scottish game developers to take on “American ghetto life.” The protagonists of the previous games were white; GTA III’s avatar was barely a character, and Vice City’s campy Miami Vice/Scarface homage starred a cartoonish mafia thug who was impossible to take seriously. By contrast, a poor black man involved in gang violence in a run-down neighborhood seemed a dubious candidate for GTA’s comic treatment.

GTA’s designers aimed to preempt this sort of criticism by invoking ethnographic authority. As a preview article in Eurogamer explained,

[Dan] Houser reckons that the intense level of research undertaken by the developer will see them through any uncomfortable claims of mistreatment or what-have-you. He points to a full time set of researchers, artists who visited every absurdly expensive Beverley Hills neighbourhood, every trainers-over-the-telegraph-wire ghetto cesspit with couches in the streets and gangbangers cruising past in low-riders, and everywhere in between, and the company’s partnerships with the likes of LA-based photographer and street culture expert Estevan Oriol and producer/film director DJ Pooh. (Bramwell 2004)

Chief operating officer Terry Donovan (who recently left Rockstar Games) gave a similar account in a 2005 interview for Electronic Gaming Monthly:

EGM: So how did a bunch of guys from Scotland research all of San Andreas’ inner-city content?

TERRY DONOVAN: Research is a really important part of development. It is vital to get the style and feel of the time and the place right. The team from Rockstar North went on a long research trip to the West Coast and traveled around photographing everything and absorbing everything. We also have a really meticulous team of researchers based in New York who obsess over every detail, and this combined with working closely with people like [tattoo artist] Mister Cartoon, [rap photographer] Estevan Oriol, and [screenwriter] DJ Pooh to draw on their knowledge and experience of the West Coast at that time helped to really put as much detail and feeling for the era into the game. (Donovan, Houser, and Houser 2005:106)

Rockstar gained credibility with cosmopolitan, hip, and media-savvy consumers (and by extension, with those who follow their lead) by conducting extensive fieldwork and employing prestigious native informants—one might say they positioned their work as “polyphonic” ethnography (Clifford 1988:53). Their field research was not undertaken as an impartial survey of West Coast physical environments but rather as a means of collecting iconic snapshots of particular cities (the Vegas strip, San Francisco’s hills and bridges, L. A.’s extreme contrasts of rich and poor neighborhoods) that could then be recreated using an aesthetic derived from 1990s hip-hop videos, album covers, graffiti, and “ghetto” films. Likewise, in choosing their research associates, Rockstar’s staff did not seek out a representative cross-section of ordinary city residents but opted to consult with rappers, low-rider club members, and people.
involved in past representations of hip-hop and “the ghetto,” all of whom have an investment in a particular vision of the places and era represented in San Andreas.

Clearly, the San Andreas Museum was not meant to represent the complexities of real inner-city life; instead, its curators sought to demonstrate their fidelity to hip-hop culture, through their aesthetic choices as well as the names in the game’s credits. The participation of DJ Pooh as one of only three credited San Andreas writers was especially important in this regard: he worked on Boyz n the Hood and the Friday comedies and is a frequent Ice Cube collaborator. Public Enemy’s Chuck D, an icon of politically conscious hip-hop, gave his blessing to the project by serving as the DJ on one of San Andreas’s two hip-hop radio stations; other in-game stations featured a wide range of older black music, including many of the classic soul and funk tracks that are sampled in the game’s hip-hop selections (Miller 2007b). As reviewer Eric Gwinn observed, “[S]omebody put a lot of thought into re-creating the hip-hop world. When former East Coaster CJ goes to his closet for the first time, you hear East Coast hip-hop, such as ‘Rebel Without a Pause,’ by Public Enemy. When CJ is in a car in the mythical West Coast state of San Andreas, the radio blares gangsta rap by N.W.A. and other West Coast groups” (Gwinn 2004). Rockstar also chose to cast both famous and little-known black and Latino voice actors in major roles. While Samuel L. Jackson, Ice T, and other big names from Hollywood and hip-hop generated buzz, the virtually unknown West Coast rapper Young Maylay (who voices CJ) and members of the L.A. Latino rap group Global City (the game’s “cholo” gang members) enhanced the game’s underground authenticity by virtue of their nonfame.

With museums, heritage preserves, and theme parks come tourists. The San Andreas Museum is a dream tourist destination, not only because of its size and diversity but also because millions can visit simultaneously without blocking each others’ photographs or creating wear and tear on the exhibits. Indeed, each GTA game offers a variant of what might be considered the ultimate tourist experience: the player can explore an unfamiliar territory and culture while passing as a native, occupying a body of a different class, race, gender, or era. Each GTA instruction booklet actually takes the form of a tourist guide, chock full of advertisements for local stores and services. But while San Andreas clearly prizes realism in some areas—dialect, clothing, music, cars—the game does not trade on projections of authenticity in the same manner as many other tourist destinations. This virtual museum exposes the underbelly of urban life, the societal “back regions” inaccessible to outsiders (MacCannell [1973] 2004:196), but it also provides reminders that this is a display constructed entirely for the pleasure and edification of visitors.

Unlike most large-scale reproductions of ye olde times or life among the natives, GTA is patently, gleefully insincere. Rather than dealing in pious “folklorism,” creating a “semblance of the nonadministered, the original, the spontaneous, the naturally evolved” (Bausinger 1990:152), these curators leave virtual tourists free to tack back and forth between viewing particular elements as authentic or artificial, sincere or double-voiced. The game dramatizes Deirdre Evans-Pritchard’s observation that in touristic settings, the authenticity of a given artifact “is an ascribed quality, which depends on who is looking at it, in what context, and for what purpose” (1987:293). Given the intensely violent activities required by the game, players have good reason
to seek out markers of inauthenticity: irony and stylization afford some ethical distance from CJ’s world.

The most impressive interactive exhibit in the San Andreas Museum is CJ himself. He is the posthuman descendant of the exhibited exotic Others at World’s Fairs and the costumed reenactors at Colonial Williamsburg: a walking, talking representative of a culture that has been fixed in time. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “Not only inanimate artifacts but also humans are detachable, fragmentable, and replicable in a variety of materials” (1998a:34). Again, this would seem to be a risky enterprise: imagine a museum of American urban culture where visitors must put on blackface and gang colors at the entrance gates.

Rockstar’s designers partly sidestepped this problem by shifting a share of the burden of representation onto players. While Vice City’s avatar had just a few special outfits for certain missions, in San Andreas players can buy new clothes for CJ in a wide variety of in-game retail stores—everything from leisure suits to fancy watches to era-appropriate sneaker styles in a variety of colors. As the San Andreas instruction booklet/tourist guide enthuses, “Whether it’s the luxury brands like Didier Sachs found in the exclusive stores of Rodeo Drive or a cheap and cheerful no-brand sweatshirt from Binco that you are after, San Andreas has something for everyone, just bring your wallet” (Rockstar Games 2004b:13). Players can also visit barbers and tattoo parlors to choose from an array of hairstyles and body art. They have to take CJ to a gym to build up his muscle rating, which affects not just his appearance but his physical capacities. CJ will lose energy and eventually lose weight unless his player takes him to a restaurant to eat. Since only fast-food restaurants are available, he can also gain weight rapidly—or throw up if he eats too much.

These innovations have major consequences for the gameplay experience. Consider the difference between playing as a young black man with short hair, a slender build, jeans, and a tank top—CJ’s default appearance—or as one sporting cornrows, gold chains, huge muscles, and tattoos, to cite only two among myriad options. One San Andreas fansite forum featured a thread called “What does your CJ look like?” There were over a thousand responses, including many screenshots. Here is a sampling of the verbal descriptions:

So far i havent done any physical work with him, so he is average build. I have given him an afro, and he is kitted out with a green shirt, grey jeans and dogtags.

No pic, but my CJ is a beast. Got him in warm ups and a track shirt, green hat and shoes. Worked out enough that his muscle is maxed out, he punched a cop car’s door off . . . Looks like a real muscle freak, like he really knew what to do with about 10 years in prison.

I was at my friends house today, and since I had basically NO MUSCLE (I starved myself) We decided to make fat Albert. We usually had 7–10 BIG meals EACH day. In about 3–4 days he was 100% fat. The only thing red jacket we could find was in Didier Sachs clothing section. It didn’t look much like it, but it was the closest (the only, actually, it had a long v-neck, though.) we gave him blue jeans and black (brown, maybe) shoes. The afro was too big, so we gave him the jheri curls. CJ’s face ruined it, anyway, but from the back it look like fat albert.
If it isn’t evident from the picture, my CJ looks like a mix of a bouncer and a hitman. Kind of cliche, but hey, I like it.

I have three CJ modes, depending on whether I’m near a wardrobe and whether I want to change or not. All of them are low-fat, max muscle:

- My standard CJ is dressed like me: green t-shirt, jean shorts, sandals, sunglasses, and a backwards cap (ok, I wear a beret instead of a cap, but still)
- “Cat burglar” CJ has a goatee and wears a beret, joke mask, black jacket, black khakis, and black sneakers. Basically, he looks like a Gangsta Beatnik.
- “Out-on-the-town-check-my-pimpin’-threads” CJ, which I rarely use, has a black boater hat, green suit, black pants, black dress shoes, a dollar chain, silver crowex, and sunglasses (all from DS [Didier Sachs])

lol [laugh out loud] i keep my cj in just heart boxers and thats it he goes out almost naked everywer9

These players demonstrate the range of possible approaches to the aesthetic and ethical challenge of controlling the look of a young black man. Some have pushed the gangbanger stereotype to its logical conclusion: a “beast” who looks like he is fresh from prison (though we know CJ has spent the last five years living in Liberty City). Others push the other way, extending the game’s ubiquitous intertextuality by making a comical “Fat Albert” from available materials. Still others dress CJ appropriately for different activities, with the default being “dressed like me.”

These practices resemble those found in “fan art” communities. For example, Henry Jenkins has described how the production and circulation of Star Trek-inspired art “creates the conditions for a communal artform, one contrasting with the commercial culture from which it is derived in its refusal to make a profit and its desire to share its products with others who will value them” (1992:249). Software “mods” for games are created and circulated in a similar fashion. But San Andreas requires that every player—not just the hardcore fan or the skilled programmer—undertake these creative modifications of an established character and that they do so in the course of everyday life in the gameworld. Sam Houser, Rockstar’s president, explained the intended impact of this feature in an interview before the game’s release:

We . . . wanted to blur the lines more between what was in-mission and part of the story and your “leisure time” in the game. These kinds of leisure-time activities really keep you connected to the environment and the character even when you aren’t doing missions. . . . By altering Carl’s appearance, you are beginning to exist in his world, both in an obvious way—you are controlling how your character looks—but also in a less obvious way—all of your actions feel like they have consequences, and you are always in the world. (Houser 2004)

This curatorial decision not only changed the players’ relationship to their avatar but also relieved Rockstar of some of the responsibility for racial representation. If players choose to dress CJ as a stereotypical gangbanger, pimp, or postprison “beast,” that’s their own problem.

For this player, choosing a look for CJ did indeed feel like a problem. When I was first trying out hairstyle options at the barber, I had a visceral reaction to seeing CJ...
in an Afro: I felt guilty for turning him into a stereotype and immediately reverted to his standard-issue short hair. Like the last player cited above, for quite a while I dressed CJ only in heart-covered boxers. The incongruity of carrying out violent missions in this outfit lightened the mood of the game and saved me from feeling like I was outfitting CJ to be a racist caricature.

But of course CJ is a caricature, by design and by definition. He can only become less of a caricature through a player’s interpretive intervention. Hence the player who is uncomfortable with buying into an apparent stereotype has two main options for relief: she can trivialize CJ—as I did for a time with the heart-covered boxers, or as others do by creating an over-the-top gangsta parody—or she can make a complex pact with him: taking him seriously, identifying with him, and justifying his motives. Eventually, I felt that I was embarrassing CJ by making him look ridiculous. I took the advice of other characters in the game and got him some clothes in his gang’s color, Grove Street green.10

The Morals of this Story: Interpreting San Andreas

In the fall of 2004, an MSNBC columnist greeted the release of San Andreas with this assessment:

“Grand Theft Auto,” the video game series reviled by parents for senseless violence and celebrated by gamers for pretty much the same reason launched its latest installment last week. . . . Drive-by shootings, car-jackings, crack use and numerous other crimes which continue to make parts of America pure hell to live in have here been turned into fodder for entertainment. . . . [N]o matter how good the game play, “Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas” is at its core a violent and mean-spirited game that rewards homicide, embraces racial and sexual stereotypes and uses real-life child-on-child violence as inspiration. (Loftus 2004)

A New York Times writer offered a similar account, under the title “The Color of Mayhem”:

The screen crackles with criminality as a gang of urban predators itch for a kill. The scene erupts into automatic-weapons fire in a drive-by nightmare of screaming car engines, senseless death and destruction set to a thumping rap soundtrack. . . . “They are nothing more than pixilated minstrel shows,” said Joe Morgan, a telecommunications executive in Manhattan who is black and is helping rear his girlfriend’s 7-year-old son, who plays video games. (Marriott 2004)

Such reports draw on the same rhetorical tropes as condemnations of gangsta rap. The writers focus on “senselessness,” deleterious racial representation, and a threat to children (although all the GTA games bear at least an M rating—for mature players, seventeen or older—from the Entertainment Software Rating Board). These violent gang-banging narratives perpetuate stereotypes of urban black criminality, critics say, and they play into the hands of those who seek to profit from those stereotypes, either ideologically or materially. As bell hooks puts it, “When young black males labor in the
plantations of misogyny and sexism to produce gangsta rap, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy approves the violence and materially rewards them” (1994:122). Plantation labor and minstrel shows—these phrases are heavy artillery, and they suggest that those who make or consume these cultural products are participating in systemic racist exploitation. At best, then, we might view the stylized gangsta narratives of San Andreas as fabricated “fakelore” (Dorson 1976), a compilation of racist myths that misrepresent African Americans and are a damaging discredit to real urban lives.

There are others, though, who suggest that these critics have made the mistake of the Lion in the story of the Signifying Monkey: they have taken a story literally when it should be read figuratively. As Gates writes, “The import of the Monkey tales for the interpretation of literature is that the Monkey dethrones the Lion only because the Lion cannot read the nature of his discourse” (1988:85). A Game Informer review exemplifies this alternative reading of San Andreas: “A darkly bitter and unapologetic satire of modern society [that] brilliantly ridicules the hypocrisies of our culture through heavy-handed shock value and subtle language choice. . . . The outrageous criminal actions you commit will undoubtedly spark the controversy: ‘How can they make a game that lets you do this?’ Meanwhile, the game itself asks a more complicated question of its players: ‘How did we end up with a society that allows these things to be satirized in the first place?’” (M. Miller n.d.)

The Rockstar staff borrowed San Andreas’s Signifying aesthetic—as well as many voice actors, creative consultants, and musical tracks—from hip-hop, from independent “ghetto” films of the 1980s and 1990s, and by extension from earlier blaxploitation films and black music genres (Demers 2003). Like many rappers, San Andreas’s characters often channel the black vernacular archetypes of the badman, the trickster, the Fool, and the Devil, all expert Signifiers (Quinn 2005:92–140; Wheeler 1991:213). The aesthetic, ideological, and commercial success of gangsta rap and games like San Andreas all depend on this double-voiced quality, which allows producers, listeners, and players to continually walk the line between claiming that these cultural artifacts are unimpeachably authentic—because they represent bleak realities of violence, poverty, and lack of opportunity—and that they are allegorical, ironic, not to be taken literally (just a game, just a song, just a boast, just a tall tale, a “children’s story” made for adults).

The transgressive violence and sexuality in San Andreas is accompanied by constant self-aware references to out-of-control consumer culture and to gangsta rap itself. On the gangsta rap radio station “Radio Los Santos,” a commercial for “Ice Diamonds” blares at CJ: “Nothing says ‘I love you’ like a lump of carbon mined by wage slaves in Angola. . . . Passion! It can be purchased. And it can be overpriced. Ice, available and very expensive, at De Koch Diamonds.” Or consider CJ’s friend Jeffrey, a teenaged aspiring rapper of dubious skills. He changes his name to OG Loc and gets himself a minor prison sentence to gain gangsta credibility. Bedecked with gold chains and tattoos, slinging street talk with self-conscious anxiety, OG Loc makes the real Grove Street gangbangers shake their heads in pained amusement—and becomes a commercial success across San Andreas. OG Loc is clearly a self-made minstrel-show rapper of the type bell hooks critiques, but he is presented as pathetic and ridiculous;
his buffoonish existence serves to emphasize the fact that CJ and his friends are not caricatures of this kind (K. Miller 2007b).

San Andreas also signifies upon the culture of violence it is often accused of celebrating. In one cut-scene, CJ is talking to his Chicano friend Cesar about the need to keep a low profile on an upcoming mission.

CJ: I was thinkin’ about welding me some shit together and making a silencer.
Cesar: You’re fucking crazy, holmes. You’ve gotta get out of this ghetto mentality.
CJ: So what you thinkin’?
Cesar: Let me show you. Check this out, holmes. [Gets out silencer.] Here, take mine.
CJ: Where’d you get that?
Cesar: Same place I bought my pants, holmes. This is America.

[On my field recording, the person letting me observe his gameplay erupts in laughter.]

This exchange gains new resonance when read against comments by Lazlow, a key GTA writer and a professional technology critic: “You can go to Wal-Mart and buy a shotgun, but they force record companies to bleep out profanity in CDs? If you’re in a dark alley, who are you afraid of, the kid with a video game or the one with the shotgun?” (Patterson and Lazlow 2002).

While San Andreas is the first GTA game to be set in an explicitly hip-hop-derived cultural milieu, all the games have featured hip-hop on their radio stations; as with my opening example from Slick Rick, these songs present parallels to the games’ narrative content and their stylized representation of violence. The music on the GTA radio constitutes the only direct citation or straightforward product placement in the games (K. Miller 2007b), a design choice that supports Rockstar’s efforts at “forming alliances with subcultural practices that are part of very specific taste cultures” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2003:234–5). Rockstar staff confirm this assessment; as Terry Donovan told a Wired writer, “[W]e’re not competing with Konami, Hasbro, or Mattel. We’re competing with Def Jam, Adidas, and New Line Cinema” (L. Hill 2002). Like folktales and fables, the GTA games engage players’ attention through intertextual references that rely on prior experience and established values.

Players and critics who are familiar with hip-hop culture often recognize GTA’s ironic spirit and its pervasive hip-hop citations. Black comedian Dave Chappelle—much of whose work revolves around race issues and the hip-hop world—won the hearts of many GTA players with his satirical live-action reenactment of a GTA III carjacking; he highlighted the thoroughly artificial and over-the-top nature of the game’s violence, undermining the argument that GTA is dangerously realistic (Chappelle 2003). Three years later, after the release of San Andreas, Chappelle created a sketch in which DJ ?uestlove plays a newly discovered song by deceased West Coast rap icon Tupac Shakur—a song that is ostensibly from 1994 but that contains prophetic references to George W. Bush’s election and the bombing of Afghanistan. Chappelle’s Tupac takes care to namecheck Carl Johnson: “We’ll make you bustas pay us, / Run up in your spot like CJ from San Andreas” (Chappelle 2006). When CJ’s doings are narrated by a famous hip-hop
MC from beyond the grave, the game’s intertextuality comes full circle. Meanwhile, the California rapper who voiced CJ has released an album based on San Andreas (Young Maylay 2005). The game has also attracted new fans to hip-hop and has influenced experienced listeners’ interpretations: as one critic wrote, “[A]lthough we’ve been listening to NWA’s anthem, ‘F*ck the Police,’ since we sprouted chest hair, we only now appreciate the pathos that suffuses the lyrics” (Naqvi 2005; see K. Miller 2007b).

A Washington Post reporter recounts another reception story, based on interviews with teenaged Chicano players from South Central L. A. (who were playing San Andreas in a subsidized-housing bedroom decorated with Tupac Shakur and Scarface posters):

“It’s a game, just a game, right? But at the same time, it’s more than that. There’s reality to it,” says Tito. . . . “Even down to the choppy Spanglish, the ‘Ora le, homes,’ that some of the gangstas say,” Tito goes on, “it’s all realistic.” The other guys who aren’t in South Central “won’t fully understand. For them, it’s just entertainment.” . . . “San Andreas” is like a fun house mirror to Tito, an exaggerated yet still realistic version—the dueling gangs, the racial tension—of his everyday life. (Vargas 2005)

While these young men acknowledged the stereotypical qualities of the game—“The game’s violent, yeah. It’s dangerous, yeah. It’s a stereotype, yeah,” said one avid player—they also appreciated its primarily Black and Latino characters and its reproduction of their own neighborhood, music, and speech styles. As in hip-hop reception, where some interpreters see offensive racial caricatures, others see stock characters from an established expressive tradition. Revisiting lessons drawn from the Grimm comparison, I would suggest that both gangsta rap and San Andreas employ the “exaggerated features” typical of folktale characters, features that “set them apart from reality” and “enhance with clarity the necessity and probability of any given situation” (Kamenetsky 1992:82; cf. Quinn 2005).

Published interviews with GTA designers make it clear that the games are intended as wry, funny commentary on American popular culture—as creative vice president Dan Houser put it, “it’s leveled at the broader weirdness of America and American consumerism and American action movies as well” (Bramwell 2004). The Rockstar staff position both their game characters and themselves as trickster figures, who “practice irony, ambiguity, ambivalence, satire, parody, paradox, persiflage, and all and sundry kind of rule breaking inversions” (Sutton-Smith 2005:292; cf. Abrams and Sutton-Smith 1977; Turner 1983). Journalist Thomas Wilburn refers to San Andreas as “an equal opportunity offender,” suffused with parody at every level of design. But this fact does not exonerate the game from charges of injurious stereotyping. Not all players are equally attuned to its ironic dimensions, and the game does not offer explicit alternatives to the representations it parodies. As Wilburn continues, “The real problem is not how [San Andreas] depicts the lead character, but that it’s practically the only game with a black lead. Combined with how Rockstar depicts that lead, the picture of African-Americans painted by video gaming looks bleak” (Wilburn 2005). Furthermore, GTA’s parody is backed up with gameplay engineering designed to create visceral excitement based on violence, speed, and mayhem. As with gangsta
rap, the reflexive cultural critique is there for those who are interested, but it would be difficult to argue that this is what makes these games sell millions of copies.

However, I want to contend that this double-voiced quality itself is part of what makes GTA so compelling to players. Its ambiguous implications mirror the themes of freedom and constraint explored in the gameworld. In theory, players can do whatever they want in San Andreas, but in practice CJ constantly experiences pressure from different quarters. The player’s tasks typically involve using limited resources in creative ways in order to respond to those pressures—the “ghetto mentality” of welding scrap materials into something useful, as that bricoleur CJ intended to do. Players engage in a similarly satisfying creative endeavor when they work at identifying and interpreting the scraps of political and pop-culture references that have been cobbled together to build the state of San Andreas. Ambiguity is a fundamental attribute of play, as Sutton-Smith observes; in his terms, San Andreas straddles the continuum between “play” and “metaplay,” combining hardcore gaming engineering and constant comedic meta-commentary (1997:147–50). Players acknowledge and often celebrate this ambiguity in order to make sense of San Andreas.

Both GTA’s players and its makers have a great deal invested in creating a sense of community around the series, encouraging “collaboration in a distributed medium” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996:30). People may play GTA in private, but they do not play alone: they remain aware of the existence of millions of other players. The game’s interpretive communities are geographically dispersed, but their members have all spent time in one virtual world (the state of San Andreas) and they meet, debate, and share material culture in another (the variegated public sphere of the World Wide Web). Rockstar Games encourages their activities by supplying official screenshots and advance information to gamer Web sites, building speculative buzz for new games. The company also listed twelve GTA-related Web sites at the back of the San Andreas instruction booklet—including a site specific to San Andreas, which was evidently thriving well before the booklet was printed and the game was released. Incentives for visiting player-produced sites include gaining special knowledge (user guides, maps, cheat codes, “easter eggs”); sharing one’s own virtuosity in mod design, avatar construction, or gameplay (by comparing stats); or just reading and writing tales of exploits and frustrations in the gameworld (often supported by screenshots). As Matt Hills has shown, such forums rely on the assumption that participants are not just consuming the same product but can experience “a common affective tie” (2002:180). However, while many GTA fans do seek each other out online to confirm that tie, others are disgusted by the language used in certain forums or feel it is a point of pride to solve the game’s riddles on their own. Because GTA is not a multiplayer online game, players can easily separate themselves from those who play for “the wrong reasons.”

Negative media attention plays a crucial role in constructing interpretive communities of players, because it tends to draw fans into a defensive collective. But player responses to media critiques also reveal deep ideological rifts among them. For example, players express widely divergent views about racial representation in San Andreas and how it has been assessed in mainstream publications like the New York Times. They hash out these differences of opinion in heated debates on gamer
forums and in comment threads for newspaper articles. Such debates began from the moment *San Andreas* preview material revealed that the lead character would be black: while newspaper reviewers cried foul over gangsta stereotypes, game industry reviewers and players suggested that Rockstar was taking a significant risk in requiring players to use a black avatar of any kind. Their predictions were borne out by gamer forums in which many participants complained that they did not want to play as a black man—prompting angry, antiracist responses from others.

After the game’s release, players responded to the *New York Times* “Color of Mayhem” article (Marriott 2004) in many online venues. On PS3Forums.com, for example, a forum administrator suggested, “If anything the makers of San Andreas are providing us with Racial equality. The first few games you played as a white person. Now as soon as you play as a black person people get all huffy about it.” Another contributor—“Dragonlance,” who identified himself as a Russian Jew living in Arizona—criticized perceived black privilege (e.g., in university admissions) and was warned by the forum administrator that his comments were offensive. This exchange prompted a response from a “black canadian [sic] and a really big fan of GTA,” who made it clear that she/he did not appreciate Dragonlance’s remarks but also did not assess *San Andreas* as racist. This individual’s own take on racial representation in the game relied on knowledge of its sampled sources:

> The game is not trying to discriminate or stereotype black people, it’s just trying to show the black point of view of urban style gangster life. The game is just taking the gangster movies like Boyz In the Hood, and Belly, and putting them in playable format, so i dont know why there is such an outcry from the black american community. but then again i am canadian and up here i guess there is alot less racism than in the usa, if you ever come to toronto you will be seeing alot of interacial couples walking around. (PS3Forums.com 2004)

Similar debates played out in 2007, after a *Black Voice News* writer criticized *San Andreas* for its potential bad influence on minority youth (R. Jones 2007). Again, some participants responded with racist vitriol, others mounted complex defenses of the game’s intentions, and a few identified themselves as black and asserted that the game employs stereotypes but is not racist. Some of these latter postings met with angry responses: for example, “If you’re black, and you’re sitting here saying GTA SA wasn’t exploitation, then you’re clearly an oreo cookie uncle tom. Either that, or you ARE one of the idiots who think thug life is meaningful” (PS3.QJ.net 2007).

Such discussions demonstrate the fact that there is no monolithic “black perspective” on *San Andreas*—nor is there a unified white, Latino, queer, female, or parental perspective. When players do opt to identify themselves as members of one of these groups, their diversity of opinion points to the importance of interpretive alliances that transcend these basic demographic categories. *GTA* is always played and interpreted “in a situation,” a situation with a particular institutional context (Fish 1980:309)—in this case that of mass-produced popular culture and mass-media critical reception of those products, against which certain audiences can position themselves as marginalized, misunderstood, or intellectually superior. The notion of a “magic circle” around the
gameworld tends to shut out this context by idealizing total immersion as the ultimate goal of gameplay. But as Martin Barker and Kate Brooks have shown, “practices of pleasure” connected with media reception rely on “a pattern of involvement which extends beyond the moments of pleasure” (1998:145). Digital-game ethnographers should treat these “patterns of involvement” as an essential part of the gameplay experience, be they private thoughts, collective discussions, or creative practices like the development of software mods and the distribution of GTA-related videos on YouTube. By doing this interpretive and inventive work, players are drawing up a portion of the rules of gameplay: they develop their own convictions about what counts as satisfying, successful, and ethical play through their own play rhetoric, which is “constitutive of the play from within” (Sutton-Smith 1997:105).

“Children’s Story” Redux

Does San Andreas foster a common way of knowing, a set of values, like a canonical children’s story? In other words, does it function like folklore? Motz writes that folklore can “generate and perpetuate belief” by making “an intangible and unverifiable concept appear in a concrete form that is apprehensible through the senses,” encouraging the integration of emotional and intellectual responses (1998:350). This is demonstrably an attribute of GTA gameplay, which often provides players with intersensual experiences to support their abstract ideas about racism and consumerism. In San Andreas, some things are so routine that they acquire persuasive force as basic facts of life—for example, police harassment of minority youth. Other things are presented with such over-the-top comic irony that they draw attention to the tragic absurdity of certain real-life verities, like the diamonds “mined by wage slaves in Angola” and marketed to young black men as prestige products. However, while I think there is substantial evidence that the game’s designers would prefer for players to draw these kinds of interpretive conclusions, those who are so inclined can and do take the story literally—they find evidence in San Andreas to support their preexisting ideas about black criminality, the moral corruption of urban life, the thrill of violence, or the destructive force of videogames. There is no way to conclusively vindicate or excoriate the story being told here; rather, its ethical implications rely on its players’ performances and their interpretive inclinations.

I have belabored the importance of ambiguity and interpretive agency because so many critical appraisals still treat videogames and other popular media forms as direct instruction or sinister brainwashing—particularly when their subject matter revolves around violence, sexuality, and gender or race relations. Videogames have come in for special criticism because of the possibility of long hours of immersion in the gameworld, the repetitive nature of many game tasks, and the player’s active performance of violent behavior (as opposed to a moviegoer’s spectatorship, which is assumed to be relatively passive and detached). As I was writing this article, Congressman Joseph Pitts (R-PA) made the following comments at a June 14, 2006, hearing of the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection: “It’s safe to say that a wealthy kid from the suburbs can play Grand Theft Auto or similar games without turning to a life of crime, but a poor kid who lives in a neighborhood where people
really do steal cars or deal drugs or shoot cops might not be so fortunate” (transcribed from television footage). Statements like this one lay bare the political stakes involved in digital-game ethnography. They also show that while scholars engage in debates about whether mass-media products ought to count as folklore, many critics begin from the assumption that popular music, films, and videogames work like folklore: that they can inculcate values, demonstrate behaviors, and transmit beliefs, thereby creating and perpetuating particular social formations and actions.

Without a doubt, these media genres do affect the values, beliefs, and cultural common ground of their consumers. But they are not like the programming code that governs the behavior of inherently compliant videogame avatars—or, apparently, poor inner-city kids (cf. Gauntlett 2001:57). They are like folklore as we understand it today: a form of expressive culture transmitted through intersubjective performance, “in which a group, and the individuals who constitute it, can discuss, convey, reinforce, alter, and otherwise play with the validity of a concept and their attitude toward it” (Motz 1998:350). Like storytellers or actors, players move CJ through his episodic travails. He is not their creation, and they don’t necessarily identify with him—any more than storytellers always identify with their protagonists or ethnographers with their subjects. Different players bring different “portfolios of interpretation” to the material, building up their own forms of vernacular culture and normative practices around these artifacts (A. Hill 1997:107–8). Media accounts that deny this diversity by insisting on the totalizing “bad influence” of the GTA games inspire players to trade interpretations and compare practices, validating the freedom of their own play while also confirming points of commonality.

In the 1970s, Michel de Certeau fiercely asserted that consumers of mass-media products are not simply “grazing on the ration of simulacra the system distributes to each individual,” but he also mourned that the expansion of systems of production “no longer leaves ‘consumers’ any place in which they can indicate what they make or do with the products of these systems” ([1974] 1984:166, xii). Ordinary people are engaged in creative interpretation, elaboration, and criticism of myriad texts, he claimed, but they have no venue for displaying evidence of their work. We know better today. The wealth of material that has grown up around Grand Theft Auto—the countless discussion forums, screenshots, mission guides, maps, mods, machinima, and cut-scene transcriptions that circulate around the world—suggests that digital gameplay lends itself to analysis as a widespread form of performance practice that is generating new aesthetic and interpretive traditions. Moreover, as San Andreas demonstrates, these games also tend to collect and transmit preexisting cultural narratives and modes of expression drawn from more traditional folkloric domains. As Kenichi Ohmae wrote in an influential Harvard Business Review article about Japan’s generation of “Nintendo kids,” “The web of culture used to be spun from the stories a child heard at a grandparent’s knee. Today, it derives from that child’s experience with interactive multimedia” (1995:162). That same year Felicia McMahon and Brian Sutton-Smith also observed that children’s folklore seemed to be “shifting rather than disappearing”; they acknowledged that “today’s more symbolically mobile children are sometimes more likely to be found in their own bedrooms or in front of a television set or at a home computer than in the streets or the playgrounds” (1995:296–7).
While I believe that rumors of the death of other forms of cultural transmission have been greatly exaggerated, nevertheless it strikes me that folklorists would do well to bring their skills to bear on the increasingly common cultural practice of digital gameplay. Folklorists have always been willing to pay serious attention to games, vulgarity, slang, and children’s stories—more so than other kinds of ethnographers. As I hope I have demonstrated here, these disciplinary habits of mind and the theoretical insights they have produced could be invaluable tools for the interpretation of digital games, accretions of player-produced media, and gameplay performance practice by both children and adults. Folklorists have a great deal to share with digital-media theorists, if they are so inclined. They might also make compelling contributions to broader societal debates on game violence and the “ill effects” of digital media (Barker and Petley 2001).

When I first read Ohmae’s account of the children who used to hear stories “at a grandparent’s knee,” I was reminded of the little girl in Slick Rick’s song, the one who begged Uncle Ricky for a story. I realized that hers was the first child’s voice I had heard in San Andreas. No children appear in the gameworld, although their existence is acknowledged in radio ads for amusement parks and cough medicine. Where could the children be? Not in classrooms—there are no schools or school buses in this state. Not on the streets of Ganton with jump ropes and pick-up ball games, nor poking around in alleys and underbrush to find dead bodies, as in Boyz n the Hood. There is only one hint, hidden in plain sight in the living room of CJ’s childhood home on Grove Street: a little TV equipped with a videogame console, where CJ is free to sit down and play.

Notes

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1. I use italics to designate the digital game San Andreas—an authored, narrative-based cultural artifact—and plain-text San Andreas to refer to the virtual place that constitutes the gameworld.

2. The “avatar” is the character controlled by the player. Other characters are typically called “non-playable characters” or NPCs.


5. Gates (1988), Quinn (2005), and Wheeler (1991) all discuss such characters, the latter two in connection with hip-hop culture. Quinn maps the continuities between black vernacular narrative traditions and gangsta rap using the archetypal figures of the badman and the trickster.

6. Unlike the console editions (the versions for Sony’s PlayStation 2 and Microsoft’s Xbox), the PC version permits some software modifications (“mods”) by players. See Greengiant (2005).

7. Salen and Zimmerman (whose 2004 game-design textbook Rules of Play helped popularize the
“magic circle” metaphor) do acknowledge that the circle can be considered “open” under some circumstances; my argument is that considering it “closed” inevitably distorts the nature of gameplay.

8. Subsequently, Rockstar financed the production of Sunday Driver (Strong 2006), a documentary film about a Compton/Watts low-rider club.


10. The main gang colors in San Andreas are green, orange, and purple, a design decision widely regarded as a deliberate (and prudent) avoidance of the red and blue of L. A.’s real-life Bloods and Crips.

11. This summary analysis is based on the reviews collected in GameStats.com (2005).

12. See, for example, the postings found at http://www.gtagaming.com/forums/showthread.php?t=11853&page=5.

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