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GRAND THEFT AUTO V: A SATIRICAL PARODY OF WESTERN CULTURE

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Satire is a genre of literature that stretches back thousands of years, even to its Latin roots. The word is comprised of two Latin words, *satur* and *lanx*. *Satur* means 'full', but juxtaposed with *lanx*, it shifts the meaning to 'miscellany' or 'medley'. The Oxford dictionary definition of satire describes it as "the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues." The heart and soul of Grand Theft Auto V's satire lies in its in-game media system, with news stories, bulletins, social media sites and radio stations playing out a gritty and unforgiving portrayal of Western consumer culture.

"Just like any other form of art, games are great for more than just pure entertainment. Think of books. They convey information, educate, persuade, and provide a call to action among other things. Games whose primary purpose goes beyond that of entertainment are called 'serious games', a term the game industry and even serious game makers use with enthusiasm." (Braithwaite, 2009.) According to Braithwaite, there are a number of categories that make up a 'serious game' and GTAV falls in to a few of these categories, the most prominent being a 'Social Commentary Game'. It also has elements of an 'Advergame', in that it contains in-game adverts for parodies of real life products, and a 'social-awareness' game, as the player has moral decisions about whether or not to take part in the game's more ethically and morally complex missions.

Set within the glamorous and superficial city of 'Los Santos', a very warped and fictional representation of Los Angeles, the game follows the story of three crystal clear protagonists: Michael De Santa, the middle-aged family man under witness protection, his ex-best friend and meth-cooker Trevor Philips, and Franklin Clinton, a young thug from a gang in the ghetto. The three join forces and aim for a few small heists, and one final history-making, big-paying hit.

The three-player narrative gives us a variety of viewpoints of social classes and all three of them make a statement about the stereotypes rife in the Western world. The mechanic of the game allows the player to switch between any of the

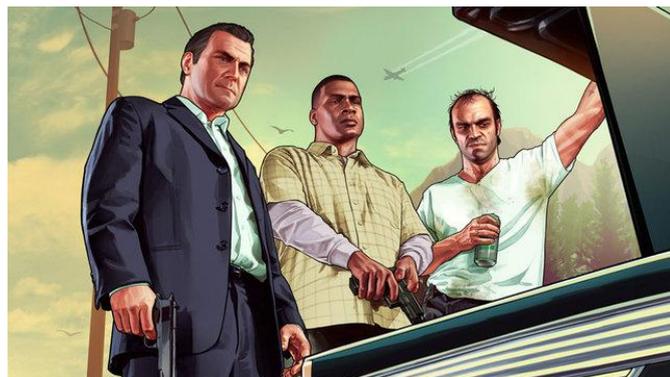


Figure 1 - Michael De Santa, Franklin Clinton and Trevor Philips (L-R)

characters at any point off-mission, providing variety and usually humorous events tailored to the character. For example, Trevor can often be found drunk, in a woman's dress, somewhere in Blaine County (the game's desert state.) Switch to Michael, and the instantly relatable scenario of a dysfunctional family is played out in front of us, featuring episodes with his estranged wife, layabout son and promiscuous daughter. Switch to Franklin and he

can be found enjoying his hard earned cash, or in a shootout between rival gangs, which is still a sad, yet very real issue in the cities of today.

The 'bite' of GTAV's nihilistic representation of Western civilisation comes from the way in which it portrays the Western world's habit of self-indulgence. Reality TV, pop stars, celebrities, social media, plastic surgery and psychiatry are just some of the subjects that are the object of this satire critique.



Figure 2- A side-by-side comparison of 'Fame Or Shame' and 'The X-Factor US'

Featured in GTAV is a parody of shows such as The X-Factor and America's Got Talent, in which guests are required to participate in a talent contest by 'proving themselves' on TV in the most humiliating way possible. Notably, the opening sequence for 'Fame or Shame' is remarkably similar to the opening title for 'The X-Factor USA', with a beam of light emanating from the sky, and darting through a city. Michael's daughter, Tracey De Santa, takes part in this show and can be seen on the game's TV channels performing a variety of degrading dances and songs. The show then states that the audience can vote (as in real life), and the voting fees are 'only' \$14.99 for calls, and \$21.99 for texts. This satirises the high calling cost that real reality TV shows give their audiences when it comes to vote for their favourite contestant. Mark King of The Guardian calculated the calling costs and voting habits of a regular X Factor voter. If the contestant voted three times a week, for 10 weeks on a '3' network tariff they would total a bill of £21.30 (\$35.78 USD).



Figure 3- Righteous Slaughter 7, shown on the in-game web browser

Games themselves are even the object of satirical critique. Rockstar's take on modern, first-person-shooter combat games is called "Righteous Slaughter 7: The Art of Contemporary Killing", developed by the fictional Misfire Studios for the eXsorbeo 720 console. Michael's son Jimmy can be

found playing the game in his room, throwing homophobic insults down the microphone at his teammates – perpetuating a stereotype surrounding first-person shooter players. The imaginary game features a level involving “JFK and Fidel Castro ‘duking’ it out on the moon”, which is a very clear parody of Call of Duty: Black Ops, which features the above characters and locations.

The player can visit social media sites called Bleeter (Twitter), and LifeInvader (Facebook), and vacuously share and view posts of scantily clad women on the beach. The player can access these sites from anywhere including real life, and take ‘selfies’ of themselves (as Michael, Trevor or Franklin) and upload them to a social club via a real life account hosted by Rockstar Games.

The character Michael gives us the best viewpoint of this portrayal of Western culture, he is the stereotypical middle-aged white male who has ‘made it’, yet he is unhappy with his life. He is struggling to cope with the boredom that faces him after he pilfered a large amount of money during a big heist with his best friend Trevor twenty years ago, and he is still living off of the wealth accumulated. The player then plays as the demure Franklin, who has never had anything growing up in the ghetto and has resorted to ‘collecting’ cars for an unwholesome salesman, just to make a living. He then ends up aiding an angry Michael in chasing down his favourite yacht from the hands of thieves. A notable website and quotation stems from an in-game website called ‘docktease.com’, where the CEO of the company writes “I started this business in 2008 to make luxury watercraft accessible to a broader spectrum of rich people.” The quote sums up perfectly the shallow nature of Michael’s depression.

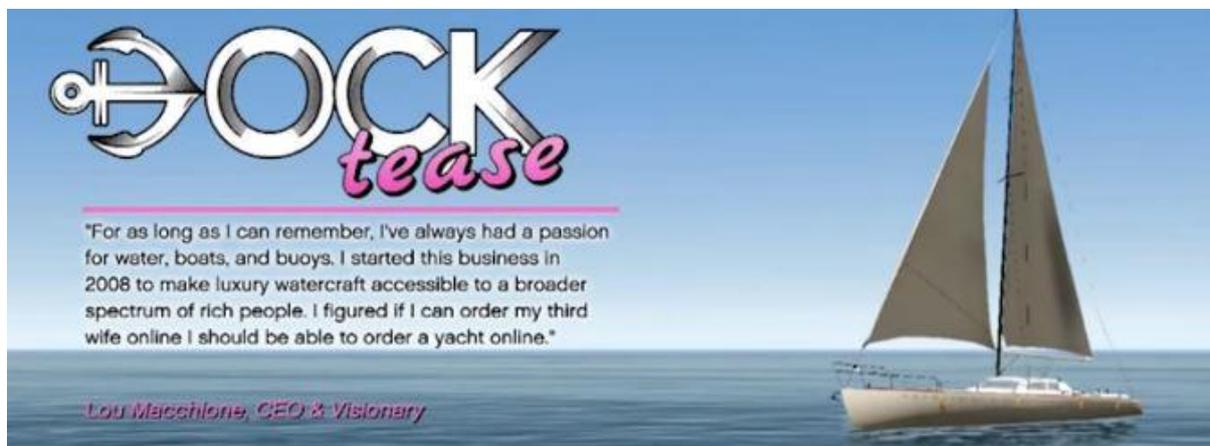


Figure 4- Docktease.com as shown on in-game web browser

Michael eventually ends up being indoctrinated by in spoof religion of ‘The Epsilon Program’, a gritty mockery of The Church of Scientology. The real-life Church is notorious for being the subject of tax evasion, false religion and brainwashing. The church has a large following, and is populated with a few celebrities such as Tom Cruise, John Travolta and Kirstie Alley. At the beginning of GTAV, a news broadcast by the in game news channel, ‘Weazel News’, states that the Program has been declined ‘religion’ status by the United

States government and can now be taxed, as if it were a business. Throughout playing the cult's side missions, Michael and the player are forced to spend incredibly large sums of money in order to progress – similar to the Church of Scientology's 'membership' scheme and charges for its 'cleansing' services. The Epsilon programme is a very unforgiving parody of the Church and its members, and it is constantly the focus of attention in GTAV's media system.

The radio stations in Grand Theft Auto V play a large part in the satirical façade of Los Santos and Blaine County. After smashing in the window of an unsuspecting sports car, the character will automatically set the radio station to his favourite (and sometimes protest if changed by the player) – Trevor favours the grunge, punk tunes of Channel X, whilst Michael enjoys Los Santos Rock Radio, featuring music by Phil Collins and Gerry Rafferty. Franklin will set the station to Radio Los Santos, which features a number of rap artists such as Wiz Khalifa and Kendrick Lamar. There are 17 in game stations, each containing a playlist of songs by real life artists. As the music featured on these stations is by real life artists, it removes the idea that Los Santos is a loose representation of a city in the United States, changing it to actually situating it somewhere in a wealthy, famous state in America. Real life supermodel and actor Cara Delevingne actually hosts the 'Non Stop Pop' station in between songs.

Radio Stations have always played a large part in the Grand Theft Auto series, and more recently have been featuring issues bought up by members of the real life public. During the pre-production work for Grand Theft Auto IV (Rockstar North, 2008) on July 13, 2007, Rockstar Games launched a teaser site for the radio station at 'www.WKTTRadio.com', and provided players with a phone number to call and leave a message on. Players were encouraged to rant about what they think is "*wrong with Liberty City, America, Liberals or [your] health*". Some of the rants were featured in GTAIV on the predominantly liberal station WKTTR. In GTAV, Rockstar has not followed in these footsteps, and have instead opted to use actors. In WKTTR's place are two radio stations, Blaine County Talk Radio – a Conservative station on which the host Dwayne Earl discusses artificial insemination, paranormal conspiracies and gives misogynistic relationship advice, at one point, advising for the caller to drown his wife. An alternative Liberal radio station also exists, although it is not available until the player has crossed back from Blaine County to Los Santos. Its name is West Coast Talk Radio, and it bares the slogan of "Real talk. Real issues. Real patronizing. Radio that's all about you." Its topics include that of The Epsilon Program, exposé celebrity stories and advertisements for the Los Santos Golf Club.

As one of the main mechanics in GTAV is driving, the player spends a lot of time driving around the city and surrounding desert. Los Santos is covered in many billboards, advertising the in-game products such as the iFruit Phone, Pißwasser Beer, and even companies not seen – such as the Los Santos Gas Company. These billboards have been carefully designed to imitate the brand’s real life counterparts, such as the minimalistic design of the iFruit’s board, clearly mocking Apple’s simple and instantly recognizable design. Political billboards and campaigns are seen more in the redneck Blaine County, yet they still mimic real life examples. Each of the boards is accompanied by a mocking or controversial message often mocking again its intended product. The iFruit board does this very successfully, accompanying the clear design with the usual self-important message Apple has next to their latest product:



Figure 5- “3% Thinner, 3% Faster, 30 Hour Queue.”

The comparison to a real Apple billboard is oddly familiar. The slogan on the GTAV billboard pokes mockery at the devout followers of Apple’s products, and their willingness to queue for days to buy anything that is new and has the brand on it, whilst actually having little or no difference in the performance.



Figure 6- Real Apple billboard

Grand Theft Auto V most definitely provides us with a very detailed, well thought out satirical comment on Western consumer culture. Real life pop stars dominate the game’s radio system and give the game a fantastic soundtrack of chart music. The player can explore the warped and star struck city of Los Santos as one of three very recognisable and

relatable characters. Televised shows, radio stations, social networking and billboards provide an in-game outlet for faux advertisements, brand parody and social and political commentary. Through utilising real-life and in game-media, Rockstar North has created a game that not only mimics a place in America, it grounds it in the present day and worships our need for a consumer driven culture.

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Picture URLs

Figure 1 - <http://www.pixel-otaku.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/GTACover.jpg>

Figure 2 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o56jsjDcqXE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8ErDbnGdFE>

Figure 3 -

http://img1.wikia.nocookie.net/_cb20130929140458/gtawiki/images/d/db/RighteousSlaughter7-GTAV.png

Figure 4 - http://img2.wikia.nocookie.net/_cb20130929141318/gtawiki/images/c/cd/DockTease-GTAV.png

Figure 5 -

http://25.media.tumblr.com/0e0ee5c5b19dbca3238d9b3474cd27ae/tumblr_muh70d6dRS1r5cmwmo4_500.jpg

Figure 6 - http://images.travelpod.com/users/davisc./1.1232566080.iphone_billboard.jpg