

Writing Technologies

<https://www.ntu.ac.uk/research/groups-and-centres/centres/writing-technologies>



Fredric Jameson and the Gangster: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* as a Cognitive Map

Alistair Brown

Writing Technologies, vol. 4 (2012), 1-19
ISSN 1754-9035

**Fredric Jameson and the Gangster:
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas as a Cognitive Map**

Alistair Brown

Fredric Jameson's 1984 essay on 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' provided an influential analysis of its historical moment, at the height of Frank Gehry's architecture, punk music, and Reaganite economics.¹ In his work, Jameson identified E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel, *Ragtime*, as a benchmark for literary responses to the climate.² In a failed attempt to tell a coherent story about America as a nation of immigrants, *Ragtime* presents a bewildering array of characters, narrative styles, and fictitious and historical plots. The narrator tries — comically and ironically — to provide a historical overview that unites the fictional and the historical. However, the reader struggles to make any sense out of a patchwork of lives and narratives. Whilst a conventional historical novel tries to represent the interconnection between minor, private lives and public, historical figures, Jameson says that *Ragtime* is 'organized systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws'.³ For Jameson, the form of *Ragtime* is inadequate as a representation of the global flows of people, identity and capital that constitute modern society. He goes on to hypothesise an alternative 'aesthetic of cognitive mapping' that will better model political culture. Given the complexity of post-industrial capitalism, this form 'will necessarily have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organising concern', something the novel seems unable to do.⁴

In the early 1980s, Jameson suggested that in light of the breakdown of the novel as an authoritative cultural reference point, the best 'cognitive map' was to be found in architecture. However, in the thirty years since Jameson's original publication a new media has come to prominence in the form of computer games.⁵ These tend to be organised around 'spatial issues'.⁶ From sport simulations, to puzzle games, to shooters,

almost all games model some sort of space and require players to manipulate or navigate the world in some way. As Espen Aarseth has theorised, cybertexts (and by extension games) are an 'ergodic' form of narrative that differs from conventional prose writing because they require 'readers' to construct their own unique paths through the various possibilities entailed by the story and game space.⁷ This navigation in space can embody political statements and thus potentially provides the kind of 'cognitive mapping' envisaged by Jameson. *The Sims*, for example, relates a capitalist ideology by requiring players to build domestic spaces which contain the latest consumer goods.⁸ The simple game of *Tetris* (which emerged from the Soviet Union) has been interpreted as representing a capitalist value system as it requires players to assemble pieces in a repetitive, Fordist task that mimics American life.⁹ But whilst some games may be read as encoding political or cultural beliefs, it would be hard to offer a universal theory of how Jameson's original vision corresponds to the new media, and to forms of space in games as diverse as simulations and shooters. However, in attempting an early theorisation of how games might convey a politics through 'cognitive mapping', and how their mapping contrasts with that achieved by a linear print novel such as *Ragtime*, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is a useful place to start.

This is partly because of the way in which *San Andreas* spatializes political issues. Its game world is large (nearly 14 square miles) and it models both countryside and cities, with shops, restaurants, cars, railways, emergency services — all the paraphernalia of the modern capitalist state, in this case a version of California in the 1990s.¹⁰ *San Andreas* exemplifies a type of 'sandbox' game that allows a player's free exploration within a virtual environment, whereby he or she can choose to pursue the main plot and achievements or simply explore the game world and the various minor sub-games within it, from driving taxis to training at a gym. Whilst *San Andreas* does have pre-scripted narrative elements elaborated through cut scenes, and a series of main missions sparked by these moments, players are not required to follow these main missions, which can often be taken in any order. Thus players encounter the game's politics more through an active process of free exploration than through narrative development. Kiri Miller has demonstrated that via this exploration, players also participate in 'gameworld tourism', a kind of ethnographical exploration of the cities and their inhabitants.¹¹ Her observational studies show that players of *San Andreas* treat the game world as a kind of museum, incarnating contemporary attitudes towards urban music, gun control and,

especially, the link between crime and race.¹² *San Andreas* is the only game of the *GTA* series to feature a black central character, called CJ. CJ finds that in order to succeed he must leave his comparatively safe suburban home (modelled on the poor Los Angeles suburb of Compton) and explore the city centre areas where (white) wealth and power is concentrated. Through the game's 'spatial organization', players learn that greater economic rewards are present in the city, but also greater risks in terms of police presence, and a greater sense of dislocation as CJ leaves his 'proper' place as a young, poor, black man, and takes on opposing gangs, white policemen, and the mafia.¹³ *San Andreas* thus offers some sense of how Jameson's 'cognitive maps' might represent economic and social issues in a spatial way that invites active exploration. As discussed in the next section of this essay, this contrasts with *Ragtime* which deliberately exploits the static form of the novel in order ironically to undermine any coherent notion of American identity and the Republic's myth of national unity. Readers are led in the text from one unrelated character or subplot to another, some fictional and some historical, some immigrant and some white American, and the narrator attempts to join them in his prose whilst we are aware that few tangible connections exist between them in reality.

Before elaborating on these deep structural differences, however, it is only fair to acknowledge that on their aesthetic surface, both novel and game still manifest their postmodernism in similar ways. Jameson argues that late capitalist 'texts' bear a close affinity with mass consumer culture. Postmodern works present a 'degraded landscape of schlock and kitsch' drawing on popular genres from film to airport thrillers to science fiction. They do not simply 'quote' these forms, but incorporate them 'into their very substance'.¹⁴ In *Ragtime*, for example, we encounter stereotypically manic industrialists and hyperbolically attractive women. The opening to the novel presents Disney-esque nostalgia: 'There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. On Sunday afternoon, after dinner, Father and Mother went upstairs and closed the bedroom door. Grandfather fell asleep on the divan in the parlour. The Little Boy in the sailor blouse sat on the screened porch and waved away the flies'.¹⁵ Referencing a mixture of genres, historical figures, and fictional stereotypes, *Ragtime* becomes a 'norepresentational work that combines fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologemes in a kind of hologram'.¹⁶ Jameson's phrase 'fantasy signifiers' might apply to games as well. Games often pastiche film and television in order to put players in the role of fantasy heroes they have previously witnessed on screen.¹⁷ Pastiche also allows games to present

violence whilst hiding behind the claim that (like movies) they do not intend their morality to be enacted in the real world. Indeed, *San Andreas*'s developer, Rockstar, which is based in Scotland, intended the game to offer a sideways glance at American popular culture, and in the process to satirise the conservatism of those who complain that games are responsible for actual violence.¹⁸ *San Andreas* rehashes those cultural reference points that will be familiar to its target audience: MTV, cinema, twenty-four-hour news, and pop music are rolled together into one 'overstimulating ensemble', to use Jameson's term. It references numerous Hollywood movies and TV series including *Scarface* and *The Godfather*, and less well-known black gangster films such as *New Jack City*.¹⁹ The game's colour palette represents 1990s California in a kind of lurid Technicolor, mimicking the style of films of the 1980s and early 1990s. Working so thoroughly in a mode of pastiche, it is possible to see *San Andreas* as maintaining the sort of aesthetic trends which are ironically reified in *Ragtime*. However, to look at the game's narrative or aesthetic surface would be to ignore deeper epistemological differences in terms of the way gamers and readers assimilate their knowledge of the worlds of the book and the game. Such differences have been emphasised by the ludological approach to game studies, and although the present article only considers one example from each genre, the present contrast between *San Andreas* and *Ragtime* fits within this broader theoretical framework.²⁰

Representing History

Ragtime sets itself up as a historical novel, as the narrator appeals to a common body of knowledge through an implausibly universal, even desperate, use of the first person plural: 'There was in these days of our history a highly developed system of interurban street lines'; 'This was the time in our history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting'.²¹ In the third chapter, the narrator swiftly skims over the struggle of early immigrants who stole, drank, raped and killed, in order to bring us to a utopian point when 'somehow piano lessons began to be heard. People stitched themselves to the flag. They carved paving stones for the streets. They sang. They told jokes'.²² This is a seductive national myth of the American Republic.²³ However, as Jameson observes, Doctorow's simple sentences, although grammatically perfect, nevertheless give the disturbing effect 'of some profound subterranean violence done to American English'. Doctorow's language draws our attention to the wholesale elisions and simplifications that are needed in order to produce this representation of democracy. Instead of a novel which

represents the historical past, the stylised prose self-reflexively represents 'our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes "pop history")'.²⁴

Against this ironically panoramic vision of history, Doctorow plays off the numerous sub-plots that comprise the novel, and which are only tenuously connected to each other, if at all. For example, after a long discussion of the 1906 murder trial of the wealthy sadomasochist Harry K. Shaw, the narrator then turns abruptly upon the hinge of a paragraph break, and says, 'Coincidentally this was the time in our history when the morose novelist Theodore Dreiser was suffering terribly from the bad reviews and negligible sales of his first book, *Sister Carrie*'.²⁵ That use of the word 'coincidentally' reflects the ambiguous contingency. Is Doctorow saying that somehow the murder trial of a sex-crazed industrialist, and the difficulties of an obsessive-compulsive novelist, are to be seen as parallel patterns in 'our' patchwork history? Or is it literally true that the two things are coincidental, and arbitrarily inserted by the narrator? Linda Hutcheon has argued that *Ragtime* presents 'an extended critique of American democratic ideals through the presentation of class conflict', represented by the economic status of three groups: Anglo-American (covering Father, Houdini, Shaw and others), European immigrant (represented by Tateh), and black American (Coalhouse Walker).²⁶ However, Jameson criticises this view as lending the novel 'an admirable thematic coherence few readers can have experienced in parsing the lines of a verbal object held too close to the eyes to fall into these perspectives'. The problem is that 'the objects of representation, ostensible narrative characters, are incommensurable and, as it were, of incomparable substances, like oil and water — Houdini being a historical figure, Tateh a fictional one, and Coalhouse an intertextual one'.²⁷ The characters and the episodes narrated around them are connected by such a tenuous logic that it is impossible to place them into the overall historical, political and social pattern that the narrator seemingly desires. Whilst we may recognise each individual moment or character as noteworthy, it is hard to detect a historical causality in the symphony of the whole. Indeed, the novel satirises J.P. Morgan, who has become fascinated by Hermeticism, and who wants to prove 'that there are universal patterns of order and repetition that could give meaning to the activity of this planet'.²⁸ The implication is that if we make sense of the novel, and see it as an accurate statement about history at root (rather than about naive representations of history), then we have somehow succumbed to this sort of comforting

but crazed conspiracy theory that sees connection rather than mere coincidence.

Part of the problem is that we are never sure precisely whose perspective on history we are supposed to be sharing: the characters', the narrator's or the author's. At the start of the novel, the Boy, who obsessively reads newspapers, has 'conceived an enormous interest in the works and career of Harry Houdini, the escape artist'. The subsequent paragraph lists a series of Houdini's exploits in what we might initially take to be free indirect discourse, with the narrator dropping in short, descriptive sentences as if lifted from the Boy's newspaper reports. The paragraph ends, though, with a historical observation that cannot be made via the Boy's consciousness: 'Today, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escapes is even larger'.²⁹ We seem to blend from focalisation via the Boy who is interested in Houdini, to the more panoramic view of the narrator *on* Houdini. This again highlights the disconnect between the individual histories of the characters, and the national history to which they allegedly relate. As if this were not disorientating enough, the passage then returns to the Boy's point of view, where he watches a car move past his house before strangely swerving into a telegraph pole. Coincidentally (or not), out steps Houdini, who then reappears throughout subsequent chapters, sometimes conforming to historical truth — such as when he is nearly buried alive — and sometimes not, as in this particular car crash. Throughout, the novel disconcertingly plays with the expectations of the realist genre. In one simple but revealing instance, the Boy thinks of his grandfather telling him stories from Ovid, and then we are told that 'He could look at the hairbrush on the bureau and it would sometimes slide off the edge and fall to the floor'.³⁰ Does the falling hairbrush represent a form of telekinesis? Or can we explain the hairbrush as merely a projection from the over-vivid imagination of a child? Unresolved questions such as this keep the reader in a state of limbo, uncertain of how this fictional realm relates ontologically to our own reality.

Traditionally, the omniscient narrator of historical novels might situate a diverse society within an overall moralistic framework. But *Ragtime's* narrator seems to be problematic, making grandstanding gestures towards 'our' national consciousness that are deliberately ironic, given his blithe disregard for the boundaries between fact and fiction, or the connections between different characters' stories. As Jameson contends, the novel transforms 'the stream of time and action into so many

finished, complete, and isolated punctual event objects which find themselves sundered from any present situation'.³¹ That is to say, each sub-plot or individual character is largely self-contained, with any connections between them (such as that between Shaw and Dreiser mentioned above) emerging from the narrator's grammatical way of writing that makes it seem as if the two must paradoxically be related, and refer to the real world in some way. The conventional historical novel situated minor figures in relation to wider historical events or political visions, such as that of the American Republic. However, *Ragtime* expresses the difficulty of finding a contemporary form that could 'enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole'.³²

Ragtime might thus be said to be almost hypertextual, with its fragmentary plots and apparently random focalisations. Although the narrator strives to convey an ultimate story about the American consciousness, how we arrive at that vision seems to be the product of his arbitrary choices, much as a hypertextual narrative is the product of choices made by an interactive reader. The possibility of reading postmodern fiction in multiple ways, linked to the poststructural theorisation of texts as embodying an infinite realm of possible interpretations, suggests we might view the novel as analogous to hypertexts and, potentially, computer games. However, ludological game theorists — starting with Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* — have stressed the limits to this analogy because of the ergodic quality of game and cybertexts.³³ Sandbox games like *San Andreas* produce a large world space regulated by general rules, and allow players to explore and exploit it in a large variety of ways. This freeform quality may be analogous to the arbitrary links that connect the characters of *Ragtime*. However, reading *Ragtime*'s pages at random would provide a dissatisfying reading experience. By contrast, in a sandbox world it is expected that players will work to construct their own particular narrative path through it. It is this that offers players of *San Andreas* a different, more coherent quality of knowledge about American society than that which is perceptible in the novel.

San Andreas's diverse urban, suburban and countryside space allows players a high degree of freedom. In a series of sub-games, players can steal a car, buy food and clothes, perform street races, date girlfriends, ride subway trains, watch the sunset, battle with rival gangs, or simply walk around capturing screenshots with a virtual camera. These *mise-*

en-abyme can be seen as comparable to the 'punctual event objects' Jameson observes in *Ragtime*, since superficially each sub-game seems of little relevance to the overall major story. However, gradually these apparently isolated mini-narratives converge, and through performing disparate actions players come to generate for themselves a narrative account of American identity. Players progress towards a conclusion that is a twisted but nonetheless extant version of the holistic American Dream, as CJ develops from his impoverished beginnings to become a wealthy criminal in possession of numerous houses, villas, cars and other assets. Unlike in *Ragtime*, where the 'individual subject' does not connect to 'the ensemble of society's structures as a whole', the narrative perspective of *San Andreas* ensures that players interconnect their local actions with more global effects. Players focalise through two different kinds of perspective simultaneously. In a kind of first-person point of view, a player's physical thumb movements on the console control pad correspond directly with the movements of a character in the virtual world. At the same time, though, a player sees CJ from the outside, third-person point of view, looking at his body as it moves through the world, rather than seeing transparently through his eyes. This contributes to the role-playing aspect of *San Andreas*, a notable innovation for the *GTA* series. Games such as platformers or first-person shooters typically push players through progressively harder levels, until it may become too difficult to complete. However, role-playing games require players to develop a virtual character's personality, traits and equipment over a long period. Such games typically adopt the third-person point of view so that players can see the physical changes in their character on screen. Although the difficulty of the game (its enemies or missions) may increase, so too do the skills, attributes and equipment with which game characters can tackle them. Buying the right sort of clothes for CJ can cause rival gang-members to respect him and not attack him; playing the exercise games in the gym improves CJ's fitness and makes it easier for him to run away from the police on foot; CJ can practice shooting and improve his aim by training at the local gun club. These everyday actions thus affect the ease with which a player can carry out main-game missions in certain areas, having significant effects on the primary game narrative, which sees CJ eventually become a gang leader himself.³⁴ Through a conjunction of fairly ordinary experiences and unusual criminal activity players build up CJ from poor beginnings to affluent ends. Much of the pleasure and reward of the game stems from the feeling of actively recreating a narrative of capitalist success through CJ's game history — acquiring money, clothes, new hairstyles, cars — but doing so not only through

criminal force but also through making ordinary life choices within a familiar commercial context.

Ragtime seems somewhat defeatist in its portrayal of individual lives that only barely connect to the incessant drive of the grand narrative we popularly call 'history'. If Houdini or Roosevelt are commensurate with fictional everyman characters who are oddly reified by giving them proper names — Boy, Father — what distinction is there between the ordinary and the 'Great Men' of conventional, Whiggish history? The narrative perspective of *Ragtime*, whereby it alternates between local focalisation through an individual character and the panoramic vision of a nostalgic narrator, highlights for readers the irrelevance or incongruity of the self in relation to wider historical contexts. By contrast, the game succeeds in aligning the player's sympathies and experiences with those of CJ, the virtual character, and in placing his experiences (both everyday and extraordinary) within the ideological umbrella of American capitalism. This may, in one sense, be another naive representation of history; certainly, *San Andreas*'s pastiche quality reminds players that any successes they have are only possible in this cartoonish game world, not necessarily in reality. Nevertheless, via the spatialised nature of its imaginary world, *San Andreas* still reveals some deep-seated political realities in terms of economics and race.

Spatialised Politics

Whilst *Ragtime* deliberately uses coincidence in a way that places it outside conventional realism, making it hard to map the characters and events of the novel onto actual or historical truth, in order to play the game of *San Andreas* successfully we must come to understand and map the degree to which the game shares with or deviates from our own reality. The game is presented as a fairly accurate simulation, with recognisable cityscapes and AI behaviour, bounded largely by the rules of physics: CJ cannot fly; buildings are realistically solid. Within this framework, successful players have to notice those aspects of the game that have been slightly adjusted. For example, the game's physics engine is quite accurate — sports cars handle differently to buses — but is also exaggerated, so that a car never simply turns a corner but screeches and slides dramatically, and can take excessive amounts of damage. Similarly, although the judicial rules bear some resemblance to our own world, the game has a unique standard of law enforcement that players must learn. Driving into a civilian, for example, causes a policeman who happens to witness that act to pull over and attempt an

arrest. However, if the player hits pedestrians without the police seeing directly, several such murders are possible before their interest is provoked. The skill of the game lies in learning what boundaries can be pushed and what remain the same as they are in reality. Players can opt to run through a roadblock, knowing that most cars will survive a head on collision; they can decide not aimlessly to kill a civilian now, in order to ensure that there will be fewer police around when they attempt a main game mission at some later point.

Successful players are therefore required 'cognitively to map' the game world so that they become capable of easily navigating its various geographies and their embedded social, physical and judicial structures. Kurt Squire argues that educational outcomes of games emerge because 'They are uniquely organized for a functional epistemology, where one learns through doing, through performance'.³⁵ In *San Andreas*, players have to perceive how space relates to civic and economic power if they are to be successful. Wealth and power are typically concentrated at the urban centre points of the three islands that divide the game world. This is symbolised by the high-rise skyscrapers that dominate the screen, even at times imposing upon the player's free view. Wherever one roams in the world, however far one moves out into the suburbs or countryside, skyscrapers often loom through the mist. Not only are they implicitly the visual focal points of the game, by which players can orientate themselves, they are also correspondingly the nexuses of social power. The police are less commonly found in the suburban or countryside areas, allowing one to get away with more crime here, whereas the central zones are heavily policed. It is also harder to manoeuvre cars through congested city centres compared to suburbs or countryside areas that contain less traffic. Correspondingly, many of the more difficult and rewarding main missions are concentrated in the city centre, rather than in the outskirts. Although over half the game's area is countryside, the majority of the missions take place in its three cities. This is why Kiri Miller can read *San Andreas* as a kind of anti-colonial narrative. CJ starts in a black, suburban ghetto that provides a safe environment, with friends who offer him odd jobs, and with safe houses where CJ can sleep (which saves the game) or change his clothes. However, to succeed in the principal game missions players must leave this safe space and colonise urban centres. Here is where CJ encounters (white) characters such as corrupt police officers, government secret agents, or real-estate developers, who offer him greater financial incentives for correspondingly increased risk.³⁶

Another way in which the gameplay mechanic has an economic dimension is in the presentation of vehicles, which are (as its name suggests) essential to *Grand Theft Auto*. From a database of hundreds of different vehicles, the game engine sets cars to spawn in a way that is determined by the space that players occupy. In its simplest effect, this means that a tractor will not unrealistically appear in a city centre. However, this also models social norms: the cars to be found in the slums or countryside or suburban areas are more likely to be slow or broken; the more expensive and fast cars are found in the wealthier suburbs and city centres, often parked in executive parking lots hidden at the top of tall buildings. Additionally, when players hijack a car, their radios are pre-tuned to appropriate channels. Cheaper cars from the poorer areas are often set to right-wing talk radio, or urban music; more expensive cars tend to be tuned to mainstream music channels. Although after entering a car players can change the preset radio stations if they wish, in practice Kiri Miller has shown that many prefer to let the game determine what music will play.³⁷ Listening to popular music in an expensive car may remind players that CJ has stolen something he could not normally hope to afford himself, providing an edge to the game of theft. It also marks the way CJ's economic exclusion relates to cultural norms he is beginning to usurp. Aesthetic and class tastes, then, are tied to space, with cars found further out from the centre of the city those which tend to encapsulate counter-culture, such as rap, rather than the popular musical genres or talk radio to be heard on cars hijacked nearer the centre.

The modelling of capital thus takes place in the spatial and audio structure of the game. Additionally, we must consider how players experience it temporally, and how this differs from *Ragtime's* historicity. As we have seen, Doctorow's narrator switches confusingly from a focalisation through the eyes of a character, to a historical observation that can only take place from an extradiegetic level. *San Andreas*, by contrast, maintains a single focalisation over CJ's shoulder. Any general analyses we might make of the game — its spatial representations of capitalism, for example — are conveyed via the local experiences of the character who walks, runs and drives through its world at a fairly realistic speed. The only actions that can dramatically affect the game world are those that players make via their interaction, and any relevant experiences impinge themselves directly and immediately upon CJ's body. As they progress, for example, players acquire cash that allows them to buy tattoos, haircuts, or more expensive clothes for CJ. The only things which matter in the timeframe of the game are those

which occur to CJ, vicariously caused and experienced by the actual player. By contrast, the omniscient narrator of *Ragtime* provokes the reader into observing the gulf between the objective truths that one might ideally want to establish through a historical novel, and the actual, subjective nature of modern history and politics as it is experienced from numerous, individual points of view.

This does not necessarily mean, then, that games inherently have the capacity to analyse postmodernity that the novel as a form lacks. However, the example of *San Andreas* does suggest that postmodernity — especially its complex city spaces and their human inhabitants — can be represented in a way which makes one focalising character an apparently authentic witness to the space and politics of the game world. This contrasts with the suspicion of any one point of view that characterises postmodern literature such as *Ragtime*. However, whilst game players' spatialised experiences may reflect some aspects of economic reality even via a single focalising perspective, the game works primarily through pastiche rather than an attempt at realism. Is it fair to suggest, then, that players perceive *San Andreas*'s formatting of capitalist space in a sustained way? Does this mark a recovery from what Jameson laments as being 'the repudiation [...] of one of the age-old functions of art — the pedagogical and the didactic'?³⁸ Here is where the racial dimension of CJ's black origins (which are unique to this game in the *GTA* series and unusual in games generally) become important. Some pedagogic effects are produced through *San Andreas*'s modelling of a black character in the city space, effects which differ from those made possible by a postmodern literary work such as *Ragtime*.

Mapping Race

Often in American literature, racial questions have been tied to the problems of capitalism. As Linda Hutcheon argues, *Ragtime* shows how class issues underpin the fates of the black Coalhouse, the immigrant Tateh, and the white Houdini. However, *Ragtime* represents the limits of an endeavour to articulate the deep problems of capitalism through exploring more obvious racial differences, and vice versa. In *Ragtime*, the black pianist Coalhouse Walker temporarily enters the life of the white, all-American family. Father, who hopelessly stereotypes African-Americans, cannot understand how Coalhouse takes tea with them without any apparent social unease. Only later does it occur to Father that 'Coalhouse Walker Jr. didn't know he was a Negro [...] Walker didn't act or talk like a coloured man. He seemed to be able to transform

the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's'.³⁹ The implication is that for the black man, his 'passing' as white is coincidental rather than a deliberate political statement or radical usurpation of the order, because Walker does not really identify himself as black in the first place. Walker instead assimilates himself within capitalist ideology and thus effortlessly passes for white. Walker, for example, fetishises his Model T Ford, and it is only when this is desecrated by some white firemen that he is forced to confront his own racial identity. Thus the novel sees capitalism as the dominant determinant of identity, over and above that of race, and refuses to present us with a black hero whose outsider racial status can reveal the white family's smug but unconscious economic status. Indeed, capital seems to be the way for Walker to escape from racial difference. The implication is that if only racial outsiders, such as immigrants, would become more capitalist, racial issues would die away. Yet it is telling that the most socially mobile character in the novel, Tateh, who eventually becomes a cinema director, is also a fictional one, compared to the historical (and white) entrepreneurs such as Houdini, Morgan, or Ford. Such a vision of capitalism as the route to racial equality, like that of history more generally in the novel, is presented as naive. There are no maps for resolving these conflicts in reality.

By contrast, *San Andreas* visualises a politics of difference that actively forces the playing self to confront a black other as the seamy underbelly to American capitalism. Not only does the player see that 'other' self, they also are encouraged actively to role-play through him. As discussed earlier, the game encourages players to pursue the 'ordinary' pastimes of a stereotypically poor, coloured man's lifestyle: working out, buying clothes that mark him as belonging to one particular neighbourhood. One element of the role-play allows the player to affect CJ's body, which will grow visibly fat or muscular, depending on how much he exercises or eats fast food (with fast food restaurants being more abundant in Ganton than in other parts of the world). As Soraya Murray observes, because we do not have a choice but to focalise through CJ, the game actively pushes racial issues to the forefront of our attention. Here it marks the gap between those who have and have not been assimilated into American capitalism: 'Ideologically configured as base, grinning, dirty, incarcerated, and exhausted, the black body is the remnant of a national equation; a glitch that cannot be assimilated into the system. But now, that signifier of the black body, that shell upon which so many

negative associations has been projected, becomes a mirror for a thorny cluster of societal relations in America'.⁴⁰

As discussed earlier in relation to the way in which players map game space, and the different economic rewards each type of space entails, what the player is able to *do* in the space of this world helps to determine who their character *is*, their identity, and vice versa. For example, because driving is more difficult in the congested city, it is more likely that here players may inadvertently knock down pedestrians, leading the police — who patrol in greater numbers in urban areas — to chase them. The game opens at CJ's home in a poor, graffiti-ridden neighbourhood which contains mainly black characters, including some friends and family members who offer CJ jobs. Many of the criminal sub-games are tied to this space, which is defined as the natural home of a poor black man. For example, in the Ganton area players will easily find a 'low-rider' type of car, which can then be used to collect and deliver prostitutes to clients to earn money with little risk. The game's sandbox engine does not intrinsically force players to behave in a criminal way (players could, if they wanted, spend their time shopping and obeying intersection stop signs). However, its environments almost naturally enculture players to perform according to a particular role as a criminal, starting with those crimes and environments often identified as having a racial character. Players may be encouraged to follow a life of crime because of the environment in which the game opens. Conversely, this indicates the degree to which an economically-deprived black neighbourhood might shape criminal behaviour.

San Andreas's rendering of race demands an empathic act on the part of the player. *San Andreas* forces us to look *at* the body of the black man, whilst simultaneously using that body to move through (and eventually beyond) the local geography a black man might experience. Thus the world space contains in-built capital and race problems, both of which contribute to the player's immersion in the game whilst motivating the way they may tend to play it. *Ragtime*, by contrast, seems to see racial difference as occluded by the deeper determinants of capitalism in a vertical structure. In this linear narrative, it is not until Walker is forced to realise his position in capitalist society, when his fetishised Ford is tarnished, that he is confronted with his own racial difference. By contrast, in *San Andreas*, rather than the one entailing the other, both race and capitalism are intertwined in the perspective the player takes on CJ's world from the outset.

Conclusion

Jameson argues that the characteristic of postmodern thought is depthlessness, so that essence and appearance, conscious and unconscious, authentic and inauthentic — in other words, models of surface and depth, or appearance and reality — are flattened. This is evidenced in *Ragtime*, with its blithe disregard for distinctions between the true and the false. Doctorow admits:

Certain facts proposed themselves to me as complete and perfect — for instance, the number of animals the conservationist Teddy Roosevelt killed on his African safari. Others demanded to be changed; people's lives suggested they had already turned into fiction. I'd never read that J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford met. But for me their meeting was unavoidable [...] So have they met? They have now.⁴¹

With their continual push for photorealism and behavioural simulation, computer games blur the boundaries between real and virtual worlds, in a way that might seem to be the apotheosis of this tendency to accord fiction equal status to historical fact. Indeed, superficially, games such as *San Andreas* may be seen as postmodern products, designed to suppress the player's critical faculties by presenting an 'overstimulating ensemble' of media experiences, and pastiching existing stories and films rather than creating truly new ones. It is perhaps surprising that Jameson has spoken little of games, since they seem to accord so easily with his vision of the postmodernist culture industry established in the 1980s.

However, this essay has suggested some of the ways in which the geography of the game world encourages the player to internalise a cognitive map of this particular narrative model of capitalism and, especially, its relation to race. The game's focus upon one particular character whose identity players partly build themselves, but which is also partially determined by the urban environment which they must negotiate, relates significant messages about the relation between race, space and culture in late-capitalist America. Originally, Jameson argued that such 'cognitive maps' were purely hypothetical: 'the new political art [...] will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, its fundamental object — the world space of multinational capitalism — at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last'.⁴² Contemporary computer games like *San Andreas*, which maps a social city space and forces players to experience it through a complex, embodied

perspective, takes one possible step towards that for which he was hoping.

Alistair Brown completed his PhD on *Demonic Fictions: Cybernetics and Postmodernism* in 2009. He is now an Associate Lecturer for the Open University, and a postdoctoral teaching assistant in the Department of English Studies at Durham University. He is currently writing a distance learning textbook on *Topics in Modernism* for the Singapore Institute of Management University, and is preparing a monograph entitled *Reading Games: Computer Games and the Limits of Literature*.

Notes

- 1 Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 23 (1984), 53-92. Given that the present essay argues about the way in which Jameson's aesthetic of cognitive mapping can be developed in relation to later media, it seems only fair to work with his most developed version of this article, which was reprinted in a later book of the same title. Fredric Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991), pp. 1-54.
- 2 E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: The Modern Library, 1997).
- 3 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 23.
- 4 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 51. Jameson's idea of cognitive mapping is inspired by Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).
- 5 Although he has not said much about computer games specifically, Jameson has written extensively about the literary genre of cyberpunk. This subgenre can trace its roots to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which was inspired by his observations of arcade game players. However, computer games surely merit a more direct critical engagement than Jameson has yet pursued, if nothing else because of their growing popularity.
- 6 Michael Nitsche *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008).
- 7 Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Maryland, OH: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), pp. 1-2.

-
- 8 Miguel Sicart, 'Family Values: Ideology, Computer Games and *The Sims*', *Digital Games Research Association Digital Library* <<http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05150.09529>> [Accessed 9 July 2010].
 - 9 Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), pp. 143-144. Murray's observation has been criticised as representing the consequences of a narratological approach to game studies. She interprets the game in terms of its storytelling content, as if the game's designers set themselves the primary goal of relating this cultural narrative. She does not consider the fact that any 'story' she projects onto the game may simply be a coincidental by-product of underlying structures, mechanisms and goals that were primarily designed to produce a fun game. For this critique, see Markku Eskelinen, 'The Gaming Situation', *Game Studies*, 1.1 (2001) <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>> [accessed 20 June 2011].
 - 10 Rashid Sayed, 'Ten Largest Worlds in Video Games', 12 January 2011 <<http://gamingbolt.com/ten-largest-worlds-in-video-games>> [Accessed 7 August 2011].
 - 11 Kiri Miller, 'The Accidental Carjack: Ethnography, Gameworld Tourism, and *Grand Theft Auto*', *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 8.1 (2008) <<http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/miller>> [Accessed 2 May 2011].
 - 12 Kiri Miller, 'Grove Street Grimm: *Grand Theft Auto* and Digital Folklore', *Journal of American Folklore*, 121 (2008), 255-286. Another smaller-scale observational study which reaches similar conclusions is Kurt D. Squire and Ben DeVane, 'The Meaning of Race and Violence in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*', *Games and Culture*, 3 (2008), 264-285.
 - 13 The game was released on several different consoles, as well as on PC, although aside from slight graphical and control differences, the game is the same in all the formats. The present essay refers to the Xbox version. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, Rockstar Games (Rockstar North, 2005).
 - 14 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 2-3.
 - 15 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 4.
 - 16 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 23.
 - 17 Some examples of games that work in a mode of pastiche include Rockstar's most recent offering *LA: Noire*, which puts players in the role of a detective in 1950s Los Angeles, representing that world through a film noir lens; the violent and sexually explicit first-person

- shooter *Duke Nukem*, which puts players in the role of an exaggeratedly macho character; *Max Payne*, which is influenced by Hong Kong action cinema as it allows players to fight in slow motion.
- 18 Miller, 'The Accidental Carjack'.
- 19 'Movie Connections for *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*', in *Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0383385/movieconnections>> [accessed 12 July 2011].
- 20 For a brief outline of the difference between narratological approaches to games, which analyse their aesthetic surfaces, and ludological approaches, which attempt to elucidate their deeper structures of play, see Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 15-18.
- 21 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 91; Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 4.
- 22 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 15.
- 23 For example, President Barack Obama has repeatedly reiterated the unity of America despite its racial diversity, most notably in his Presidential campaign speech, 'A More Perfect Union'. The transcript is available in 'Barack Obama's Speech on Race', *New York Times*, 18 March 2008 <<https://archive.nytimes.com/thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/obamas-speech-on-race>> [accessed 28 July 2011].
- 24 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 24-25.
- 25 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 26.
- 26 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp.61-62.
- 27 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 22.
- 28 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 148.
- 29 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, pp. 6-8.
- 30 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 117.
- 31 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 24.
- 32 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.51.
- 33 Aarseth, *Cybertext*, pp. 47-51. Although Aarseth does acknowledge some of the stronger connections between theories of text and games, especially by considering 'labyrinthine' literature against hypertexts, more recent works in game studies seem to have entrenched disciplinary differences. Eskelinen concludes his survey of narratological and ludological approaches by claiming that 'The old and new game components, their dynamic combination and distribution, the registers, the necessary manipulation of temporal, causal, spatial and functional relations and properties not to mention the rules and the goals and the lack of audience should suffice to set

- games and the gaming situation apart from narrative and drama, and to annihilate for good the discussion of games as stories, narratives or cinema'. Eskelinen, 'The Gaming Situation'.
- 34 These activities are what Miguel Sicart would define as secondary mechanics, because although they are not essential to the game they are encouraged, because they may make it easier to reach an ultimate goal. Miguel Sicart, 'Defining Game Mechanics', *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 8.2 (2008) <<http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart>> [Accessed 9 April 2011].
- 35 Kurt Squire, 'From Content to Context: Videogames as Designed Experience', *Educational Researcher*, 35 (2006), 19-29 (p.22).
- 36 Miller, 'Grove Street Grimm: *Grand Theft Auto* and Digital Folklore'.
- 37 Kiri Miller, 'Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in *Grand Theft Auto*', *Ethnomusicology*, 51:3 (2007), 402-438.
- 38 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 50.
- 39 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 162.
- 40 Soraya Murray, 'High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing *Grand Theft Auto*', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 27:2 (2005), 91-98 (p.96). Kurt Squire similarly reads the game as an educational experience: 'For some players, inhabiting Carl Johnson may be an empowering experience, enabling them to understand America's fear of and fascination with the urban African American male. Other players might ponder the limited choices and identities presented to African American males or representations of African Americans in popular media, or America's fetishization and marginalization of hip-hop culture'. Squire, 'From Content to Context: Videogames as Designed Experience', p.21.
- 41 Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. vi.
- 42 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 94.