



A WRITING MASTERCLASS

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“After five years on the East Coast, it was time to go home.”

Introduction

As a writer, particularly one who writes stories, you look for inspiration in a variety of mediums. You’ll study writing from great novels, short stories, plays, screenplays, teleplays, audio productions, monologues, etc. Increasingly, great writing is coming from the world of video games, which is truly an art form that deserves the same level of respect as any other medium.

If there’s one video game series that elevated the medium to an art form, it’s the **Grand Theft Auto (GTA)** series by **Rockstar Games**. And if there’s one game in the series that can be appreciated both for its gameplay as well as its writing, it’s **Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas**, first released in 2004.

That’s right. It’s been 20 years since the initial release of this game, and it remains a masterpiece. For any writer looking to learn about the craft of narrative writing, you’ll find many lessons while playing GTA: San Andreas.

Whether you wish to write for video games, other audio/visual mediums, performance or prose, there is a lot to learn from this masterpiece!

*The game was written by Dan Houser, James Worrall, and DJ Pooh. There’s also a huge **team of writers** who wrote pedestrian dialogue and did additional scripting. Dan Houser and Lazlow **wrote the content** (<https://www.shortlist.com/news/the-making-of-the-grand-theft-auto-games-with-lazlow-jones-404579>) for the in-game radio stations.*

Since the game and its story is so vast, there are many omissions I had to reluctantly make. I can’t discuss every character, mission, dialogue, theme, etc. Nevertheless, this guide should discuss enough to help you appreciate the game’s story more. It should show you how you can improve your writing by playing the game. This guide will offer writing lessons. It’ll also analyze the story, and its various elements to see what makes a great story overall.

“Grove Street, Home.”

How to Start a Story

The Introduction of GTA: San Andreas
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpTizzox2Qo>)

Another Introduction Short Film, Further Explaining the Story’s Setting and Context
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-wLIAISF9I>)

When you start a new game, you’ll watch the opening credits. After they finish rolling, the opening “cutscene” shows before you can start playing the game.

The story takes place in 1992. We see our protagonist, Carl Johnson “CJ” checking in at Francis International Airport in Liberty City.

In the next scene, he picks up his suitcase from the baggage claim at Los Santos International Airport. His voiceover states: **“After five years on the East Coast, it was time to go home.”**

Immediately, there’s intrigue. Within about 8 seconds, we see CJ checking in at one airport and getting ready to leave another airport. We immediately wonder why he was on the East Coast for five years. Why was it time to go home? What was so urgent?

The answer comes immediately. We hear a phone ring and a voiceover of CJ speaking to his brother Sweet.

“Sup?”

“Carl, it’s Sweet.”

“Whassup Sweet, whatchu want?”

“It’s momma...she’s dead bro.”

This short conversation, only lasting a few seconds and with only a few words, adds another layer of intrigue. Since this is a crime-related game, we can anticipate that Ms. Johnson’s death wasn’t due to natural causes. We can assume that foul play was involved and immediately we’re hooked.

All of this, in less than 20 seconds.

This is an immediate lesson for writers. You don't need to explain everything with as much detail as possible. In fact, depending on your time constraints, you might want to hold off on further details until much later.

That's what the introduction does. It leaves us with intrigue, knowing that it'll be some time until we find out why Ms. Johnson died, and whether foul play was involved.

Enter Officer Frank Tenpenny and Officer Eddie Pulaski.

First of all, just the name itself, "Tenpenny" is brilliant. A great way to create memorable characters is to give them memorable names. Tenpenny perhaps comes from the British expression "ten a penny" (the founders of Rockstar Games and the masterminds behind *GTA* are British), which means "something common or something not particularly valuable."

Side note: Later in the game, you'll hear Kent Paul **use this phrase** (https://youtu.be/TOOsq_dUyyk?t=429) when referring to keyboardist and drummers. It should be noted that Samuel L. Jackson (who voiced Officer Tenpenny) acted in the film, ***One Eight Seven*** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118531>). In this film, his character gets stabbed by a gangbanging student – using a "tenpenny nail," which is mentioned in one scene. This same film featured Clifton Collins Jr. playing a character named Cesar – exactly like in the game!

After CJ leaves the airport, he gets into a taxi heading home. The taxi is requested to stop as a police car is trailing it. Out comes the two officers, pointing their guns at the taxi. We then see Officer Tenpenny, speaking into the device, demanding that CJ gets out of the taxi with his hands in the air!

Once again, there's intrigue and this opening sequence hasn't even gotten to the one-minute mark yet!

CJ gets into the police car as they drive through Los Santos. During this sequence, we learn that CJ has had an old relationship with Officer Tenpenny. Tenpenny is a corrupt cop who decides what goes on in the city. We also now learn that CJ has a criminal record:

Tenpenny: "So what else you got shaking Carl?"

CJ: "Nothing. I live in Liberty City now. I'm clean, legit."

Tenpenny: "Nah, you ain't never been clean, Carl."

We can guess that Tenpenny wants to take advantage of CJ's criminal record. This isn't an arrest that'll lead to jail time. This is something else. We just see the police car driving, without seeing the characters in the car. The audio dialogue speaks for itself.

Pulaski asks, “Well, what’ve we got here?”

Tenpenny responds by saying that ‘this’ is a gun that was recently used to kill another police officer, Ralph Pendelbury. Tenpenny mentions that the officer was gunned down “not ten minutes ago” which adds to the tension. The story has just started, and already we’ve met two corrupt cops who killed a fellow officer so recently that the gun is probably still hot!

Without seeing much, the writers have now set up the story for us. Tenpenny and Pulaski wish to frame CJ for the murder of Officer Pendelbury. They want to pin the gun on CJ. We can surmise that it was Tenpenny and Pulaski who killed Pendelbury. The question is: why did they do it?

This doesn’t get answered immediately.

Again, when writing an epic story, delay the details if you’re given the time to do so.

Eventually, the cops let CJ go. Tenpenny tells CJ that he’ll hear from him, so we know that we’ll be seeing more of these officers throughout the game. But when CJ is being dropped off, he’s not being dropped off at his doorstep.

He tells the officers that they can’t leave him in one particular neighborhood because it’s “Ballas Country!” Yet again, the writers have created intrigue. Who are the Ballas?

When CJ is thrown out of the car, we hear his voiceover narration:

“Ah shit, here we go again. Worst place in the world. Rollin’ Heights Balla country. Now, I ain’t represented Grove Street in five years, but the Ballas won’t give a shit.”

So now, within four sentences, we’ve established CJ’s background. He’s a former gangbanger representing Grove Street, while the Ballas are his gang’s enemy. While he left gangbanging behind when he moved to Liberty City, it’s still dangerous for him to be on their turf.

Meme culture wasn’t a phenomenon in 2004. But today, GTA: San Andreas has spawned and continues to spawn many memes, including from these lines: (<https://www.sportskeeda.com/gta/ah-sh-t-go-again-gta-san-andreas-famous-lines>)

Once this voiceover ends, the player can begin playing the game. The first task is to simply get on the bicycle parked in the alleyway and ride all the way to the Johnson House. Once CJ arrives, you’ll hear the famous voiceover: **“Grove Street, home. At least it was before I fucked everything up.”**

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If you're playing for the first time, this phrase makes you wonder what'll happen next. If you've played this game many times before, especially if you've played when the game was first released, this phrase will bring back the wonderful feeling of nostalgia.

“...I guess that makes you an upstanding American...”

How to Write Characters

While it’s quite a stretch to refer to any of our main characters as an upstanding American, one of the biggest strengths of the game is how memorable the characters are. While the GTA games have always had memorable characters, the writers went above and beyond when creating the personalities in this game.

For the sake of brevity, I won’t get into every character or even every main/supporting character. Rather, I’ll focus on some of the ones that can teach you about how to write a great personality as well as those who have an interesting character arc.

Let’s start with CJ.



Source: [GTA.Fandom.com](https://www.gta-fandom.com)

The main playable character(s) in the franchise are always criminals. Normally, such characters would be unlikable in any story. But the strength of *GTA: San Andreas* is that one can sympathize with CJ. This is a motif that has worked for the best gangster films. In ***The Godfather***, you see Don Corleone **looking over Sonny’s body** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sIYe74sczE>) and he breaks down when he says, “Look how they massacred my boy!” you forget for a second that you’re looking at a hardened criminal.

With CJ, you see how he is tough but can still get pushed around. From the opening sequence, the cops get the better of him. While he tries to stand up to them at first, you can hear the fear in his voice when he realizes that Tenpenny is trying to frame him for Pendelbury’s murder.

CJ often gets pushed around in the beginning, which makes him more relatable. Other GTA protagonists, such as Tommy Vercetti from **GTA: Vice City**, start as hardened criminals and end as even harder criminals. While he's also a great character, the average person reading this probably can't understand what it's like being a mafioso – at least I hope you don't!

But CJ's story is more relatable. We know there are parts of the USA where people live in circumstances we wouldn't consider ideal. Crime, sadly, becomes a way of life and many see it as their only way to get out of their situation, or to survive, should they never leave their neighborhood.

CJ has a brilliant character arc. We see him being pushed around by his elder brother Sweet. At times he is mocked relentlessly by Ryder – and he doesn't do much about it, until they meet later at **Pier 69 in San Fierro, of course**.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JPRzdkSkHM>)

But CJ, despite constantly receiving flak from Sweet doesn't protest much. He argues back at times, but ultimately, he wants to impress Sweet. He wants to look after his sister Kendal, as he gets defensive when he first meets her boyfriend, Cesar Vialpando. He's deeply saddened that he wasn't there when his mother died. There are also references to another Johnson child, Brian, who died as a child – and is a huge part of the game's mystique – **even spawning fan fiction**. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emRDcnDXqIA>)

CJ has a brilliant character arc, and this is a crucial lesson for writers. If you're going to write a main character over a long story, you want to see character development. While character development isn't compulsory to tell an interesting story, it makes your audience connect with the character more.

We sympathize with CJ in the beginning, we celebrate his major achievements in the middle – from becoming a casino owner to working as Madd Dogg's manager – and we understand his frustration and anger during the final missions in the game.

There's a satisfaction that you feel after you complete the final mission "End of the Line." In the penultimate cut scene, we see Tenpenny's firetruck fall off the bridge. He eventually dies after his soliloquy, showing no remorse for his actions. After he dies, CJ looks over his body and says, "See you around...officer," while circling his hand. This comes in full circle (pun intended) from the opening sequence, when CJ is thrown out of the police car and Tenpenny exclaims, "See you around, like a donut, Carl."

Another great writing lesson. Create references in the beginning of your story that come back again in the middle and/or the end of the story.

In the final cutscene, the family gathers in the Johnson house and they are later joined by Rosenberg, Kent Paul, Maccor, and Madd Dogg. They discuss their achievement of Madd Dogg getting a gold record and discuss their next plans. At the end, CJ walks toward the

front door of his house while everyone else gathers around to chat. Kendl notices and asks him where he's going.

His simple response, "Fittin' to hit the block, see what's happening..." shows that he's no longer the former gangbanger trying to impress everyone. He's now a man who commands respect. Look at the contrast from where the story begins. He's scared that he's in an area run by the Ballas. Now, he can confidently go outside and check out the territory that the Grove Street Families run, thanks to him.

This is perfect character development and is a great lesson for all aspiring writers.

Now, let's meet Sweet.



Source: GTA.Fandom.com

Sweet is CJ's elder brother and is a character whom many players find frustrating. However, he's also a well-written character as there's a realism to him. Sweet's almost always in a bad mood, but that's because he's the head of the household.

He's concerned with the well-being of his sister, he wants CJ to step it up, he's trying to find out who killed their mother, and he wants to reunite the Grove Street Families and take back control of Los Santos.

In some ways, Sweet is a very grown-up character. But in other ways, he's the one character who never seems to grow up. This oxymoron takes expert writing and is a lesson to any writer trying to make a complex character.

Sweet isn't interested in CJ's partnership of The Four Dragons Casino, the garage in San Fierro, or that the fact his little brother mastered flying in order to save his brother from meeting Horse Cock Harry!* All he cares about is Grove Street and defending the hood. For better or for worse, Sweet would rather be a tree that stays put than a bird who migrates to the best location.

While Sweet might seem like a drier or more serious character than the others, he's nevertheless necessary to balance the story. In comedy writing, he would be the "straight man." Often, a well-written story might have one or more supporting characters who seem simplistic and who don't convey a range of emotions but are necessary to carry the story and to help the other characters develop.

Sweet also shows a contrast to CJ's mentality. CJ first ran away from Grove Street in 1987 when he moved to Liberty City – only coming home after Sweet called him to inform him of their mother's murder. Then, after running a successful garage and running Wang Cars in San Fierro, not to mention The Four Dragons Casino in Las Venturas, CJ becomes even more distant from Grove Street.

But for Sweet, this is unacceptable. Some may say that Sweet never grows up and doesn't wish to better his condition. But another perspective is that he cares about his family and friends before anything else. His personal comfort and desire to move up is secondary.

While CJ can go around buying properties throughout San Andreas, Sweet cares about The Johnson House – reminding CJ that he was born there. CJ tells Sweet that the world is big but Sweet tells him that they must defend Grove Street and they can't do it from Madd Dogg's mansion.

This contrast between our protagonist and his brother adds to the narrative and shows the dilemma of so many people who wish to leave for greener pastures.

***Toreno talks about Horse Cock Harry**
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9FUaWtp7Xw>)

Home Coming Mission Where CJ Picks up Sweet from Prison
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMzU5GGE2Q4>)

But the most grounded Johnson sibling and the most mature character from the game, is KendL.

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Source: [GTA.Fandom.com](https://www.gta.fandom.com)

When Kendl sees CJ arrive at the funeral, she immediately hugs him, and you can hear the kindness in her voice. In contrast, Sweet loses his temper with CJ when they reunite at their mother's funeral. Just as CJ and Sweet have opposing mentalities, Sweet and Kendl have opposing attitudes toward CJ. Sweet initially feels angry at CJ, whereas Kendl is happy to welcome her brother back to Grove Street.

She gets upset when she sees her brothers argue and storms off. In this moment, we also see how she stands up for herself. When she leaves, Sweet gets angry and asks her where she's going. When she says that she's going to meet Cesar, he gets angry, but she leaves anyway. This establishes that she's a strong character, and we can't expect her to be a pushover. A simple quick scene like this is a great way to showcase a character's personality.

When CJ finally meets Cesar, there's a bit of tension between CJ and José, one of Cesar's fellow gang members. José calls CJ a "pendejo," and it's Kendl who stands up for her brother and gets angry that he was just called a "dickhead."

When CJ gets to the garage in San Fierro and finds that it's a complete dump, he gets angry at himself. Kendl tells him he needs to shape up and work to build the garage. She also suggests he get involved in property development.

In the "**Customs Fast Track**" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WK1a1pUNwZ0>) mission, we see that she's also concerned about Sweet, asking CJ how they can get him out of prison. There's a touching moment when she tells CJ that "we ain't trying to lose you again." When you play the mission, CJ and Cesar talk about her, and CJ says that Kendl has become everyone's mother figure.

The writing lesson here is to have a supporting character who truly supports the other characters. Kendl is grounded and reminds the other characters what's important. She ensures that everyone is on the right track. She also stands up for herself at times, and when she is disrespected, it's rewarding to see CJ stand up for her.

While Kendl comforts CJ, Ryder just gets on his nerves!

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Source: [GTA.Fandom.com](https://www.gta-fandom.com)

Ryder is another one of the main members of the Grove Street family and is perhaps the most ambiguous character from this group. Eventually, he joins Big Smoke to betray CJ and Sweet. But it's still a mystery as to when he decided to switch sides, and many players **have speculated on this.** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJDSiNxqZow>)

While he's not a part of the story from start to finish, his limited presence still sticks with us. This, again, comes from good writing. In cinema and television, even a character with a short appearance can make a huge impact. This is where the **“no small parts, only small actors,”** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mClnPxewhw>) mentality comes from.

Here's the lesson for writers: work hard to make each character memorable. Even if they're barely a fraction of a long story, their idiosyncrasies, dialogue, etc., will leave a lasting impression on the player/audience.

As mentioned earlier, CJ develops his character arc when bouncing off Sweet's contrasting personality. The same goes for CJ's relationship with Ryder. Ryder arguably has some of the most well-written lines when it comes to roasting CJ. Early on in the game, CJ, along with Sweet, Big Smoke, and Ryder, have to cycle back home while Ballas are tailing them.

Once you reach Grove Street, a cutscene plays in which Ryder mocks CJ's appearance. He tells him that he should get a haircut and that it's **embarrassing to be seen with him** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax-EB2MYe1Q>). Throughout Ryder's missions, you can also expect Ryder to **roast CJ for his driving ability** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0Vgtp5j3WE>), or lack of it!

These roasts are another great lesson for writers. Not only are they an example of the brilliant humor and wit of the writers, but they establish CJ's character arc. You can tell that Ryder's roasts get on CJ's nerves. While he sometimes laughs it off, it builds tension between the two. It also shows us that CJ starts off as a character without much respect.

Both Sweet and Ryder teach writers how to create supporting characters who help the main character grow. Just as a double act must bounce off each other, the tension that

CJ has with both Sweet and Ryder help us view his character arc. It's through them that we first see CJ as a nobody, and we feel incredibly satisfied when we see how much respect he has gained by the time you complete the final mission.

CJ is pushed around by Ryder during the beginning act of the game. By the time he kills him in the Pier 69 mission, he doesn't hesitate to use harsh language against him – showing that he's now more confident and a lot tougher. The dialogue is an indication of how CJ's character arc has grown.

And now, we move on to Big Smoke, or “El Grandio Smokio” to some.



Source: GTA.Fandom.com

After Tenpenny, Big Smoke is the other main villain of the story. In contrast to the dark, condescending, and serious attitude of Tenpenny, Big Smoke offers a lot more humor. But beneath the humor and likability that we may feel in the beginning, he's the one who'll betray CJ and Sweet.

As a writer, it's often a challenge to create a character who has a front. Big Smoke is a great template if this is something you struggle with. We see moments of his seriousness, but he's able to quickly change moods.

CJ first encounters Big Smoke when he returns to his home. As he's looking at a photo of his deceased mother, a man charges at him with a baseball bat. It's Big Smoke, who mistakes CJ for a burglar. As soon as CJ says, “Big Smoke! It's me, Carl! Chill! Chill!” he pauses for a few seconds, and his mood changes. He's immediately friendly and gives CJ a hug.

Within this opening sequence we get to learn about Big Smoke's personality. Like his size, his personality and presence are large. He often makes profound statements, quoting from the Bible (though maybe a theologian has to confirm this), and isn't afraid to crack a joke or make a funny remark during the toughest times.

After the first act of the game ends, we won't see Big Smoke again until the final mission. However, once you complete the first act, you can hear Big Smoke **a few times on the radio** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEfMjMGJkRs>). He makes serious statements, but his choice of words are so absurd that they're funny. If you've struggled with writing humor, particularly dark humor, you want to listen to his promotion of OG Loc!

If CJ becomes fat early on in the game, you'll hear a **hilarious phone call** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyHJhWIK1qo>) from Big Smoke. And, of course, if you fail the "Wrong Side of the Tracks" mission, you'll hear one of the most **famous catchphrases** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF3GK_sfPVM) from the GTA franchise.

The lesson for writers from Big Smoke is how to create a character who can be both serious and comical at times. Until you kill him in the game, he's a character who's able to maintain a front about how tough and powerful he is.

While CJ was betrayed by Big Smoke, he found a great friend in Cesar Vialpando.



Source: GTA.Fandom.com

Often, writing a great supporting character is tougher than crafting a lead role. Cesar is one of the best characters in the game because of his loyalty to CJ. Initially, we know that Sweet isn't too happy that Kendl is dating a gang member from an enemy gang. Not only that, but the intercultural relationship also bothers him, as you'll remember from this hilarious exchange:

Sweet: “Something’s ain’t just meant to happen. I mean what if y’all have kids? Leroy Hernandez, that don’t sound good, girl.”

Kendl: “His name ain’t Hernandez.”

Sweet: “Well, Leroy Lopez then.”

Kendl: “Or Lopez, either, you racist fuck!”

When CJ meets Cesar for the first time, he gets aggressive when he sees Cesar hug his sister in front of him. She tries to calm him down. Cesar is immediately friendly, though it takes CJ some time to warm up to him.

This is a great writing lesson for depicting a growing relationship between two characters. CJ is likable because he is protective of his sister, and thus, initially cold toward Cesar. Cesar is likable because he doesn’t become aggressive toward CJ and tries to prove that he loves Kendl. It’s a slow burn until we see them warming up to each other.

There are many missions, cut scenes, and phone calls that showcase Cesar’s loyalty. But perhaps the best is during the Mission **“The Green Sabre.”**
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dY6RMkB41U)

It’s here where we see that Cesar is a true friend, as he shows CJ that Big Smoke and Ryder are betraying him and are in an alliance with the Ballas as well as Tenpenny. As the game progresses, you see their bond grow stronger and they even joke with each other at times. In the penultimate mission, **“Los Desperados,”**
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNeQHokQuE8>) you can’t help but feel happy when Cesar announces to CJ that he intends to ask Kendl, “the question.”

It's after “The Green Sabre” that we move onto the second act of the story and meet some interesting characters. But before we do, we have to discuss Jeffrey...I mean, OG LOC!

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Source: [GTA.Fandom.com](https://www.gta.fandom.com)

If you struggle to write a comic character, perhaps you need to listen to OG Loc's rhymes to get some inspiration!

The lesson for writers here is that no matter how funny or silly a character is, they should be based on some sort of realism to stand out. The game takes place in the 1990s when gangsta rap had become the most popular form of the genre, and it seemed that to have any respect as a rapper, you had to have been a real-life criminal. No doubt many aspiring rappers wanted to put up a front that they were tough. That's OG Loc in a nutshell!

One reason why Loc is such a hilarious character is that he has a complete lack of self-awareness. Or, at the very least, he wants to try hard to truly believe that he's a hardcore gangster. The only time he's humbled is when the Burger Shot customer ("Bogman") tells him "that shit sucks, damn!" which leads him to ask CJ to **steal Madd Dogg's rhyme book** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxYh1w0CFQA>).

The strength of Loc's hilarity lies in his dialogue. Since he's a "rapper" you'll notice that he attempts to speak as if he's rapping or reciting poetry. This includes when CJ drops him off at Burger Shot and says, "See you around," to which Loc replies, "like a quarter pound!"

Not to mention, "I'll become the reciter, all-nighter, all-righter!" Plus, sometimes, he doesn't think about what he's going to say. When Freddy finally gets off his bike, and you have to help Loc kill him, and the other Vagos, Loc exclaims, "Your ass is mine! Oh, no no no, I didn't mean it like that!"

Another writing lesson you'll learn when analyzing OG Loc is how to write a weak character.

OG Loc is a character who can't stand up for himself and can't hold up the front that he's tough. He has to ask CJ to do his tasks for him – though, to be fair, he does offer to come

along in the "Life's a Beach" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCZwFfd3gZU>) mission, although CJ would still do most of the work – as he did when they chased Freddy.

After all the work that CJ does for Loc, he teams up with Big Smoke, who becomes his manager. When CJ and Madd Dogg confront him much later in the “**Cut Throat Business**” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqOc-3DSnsY>) mission, Loc doesn't even bother telling Madd Dogg that it was CJ who stole the rhyme book in the first place. Throughout the same mission, you hear his fear as CJ and Madd Dogg are chasing him. When he tries to insult them, you can tell that he doesn't have any conviction. At one point, he even says that Big Smoke is going to deal with them.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that he is a weak character, the humor that he brings makes him one of the characters that players love the most. Without a doubt, he's one of the funniest characters in the GTA franchise. A silly character that we can laugh at can make him likable. In the same way that though Big Smoke is a villain, you find him endearing due to his humor.

OG Loc's Funniest Moments (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTFloLssM6k>)
Fan-Made Video of OG Loc's Radio Interview
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KH87nQq2WAc>)

When CJ is with OG Loc, he can take charge, and he is able to assert his authority over him. But when it comes to Catalina, it's a completely different story!



Source: GTA.Fandom.com

Catalina is a character whom we see in GTA III. In GTA: San Andreas, we see an earlier version of her, since the story takes place before the events of GTA III.

We meet Catalina after CJ is transferred to the countryside by Tenpenny. Cesar calls CJ and tells him that he has a cousin whom he can meet and who can help him out. CJ decides to meet this cousin to earn some money.

At this point, Carl could have changed his name to Clyde because Catalina certainly saw herself as Bonnie! Catalina is a foul-mouthed, loud, and crazy chick who is rude and demeaning to Carl but also falls madly in love with him!

Like OG Loc, such a character could be very annoying and off-putting to a player/audience. But the brilliant writing has made Catalina in *GTA: San Andreas* one of the popular characters. We only see her in five missions, and then CJ occasionally gets a few phone calls with her, including the one after beating the final main mission. Yet, Catalina is easily one of the most entertaining characters.

How did the writers do it? If you were to just read Catalina's threats, you'd think this was a serious role of a misandrist. But read it juxtaposed with some of the contrasting statements, and you'll see the dark humor. In one line, she threatens CJ and expresses her anger using the harshest language she can. In the next line, she'll tell CJ that she loves him and that a woman's heart is a tempestuous place.

Not to mention, the casting of Cynthia Farrell was perfect – the accent adds to the humor of the lines. The character is a minor character in this particular story but is nevertheless one of the most memorable.

Catalina's Crazy Moments from Missions

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPdgZPVsPkg>)

Catalina's Phone Calls (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oTzFwfcutw>)

Interview with Catalina's voice actress, Cynthia Farrell

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78a4cXchRIU>)

While getting a call from Catalina could infuriate CJ, getting a call from The Truth, makes you wonder what mystery awaits!



Source: GTA.Fandom.com

You wouldn't normally expect a gangbanger to come into any contact with a hippie living deep in the countryside on his marijuana farm. But in the world of GTA, anything is possible, and The Truth is another brilliantly written character.

A hippie who sprouts conspiracy theories and is incredibly skeptical about the government is nothing new, and the GTA series is full of anti-authoritarian sentiment, to say the least! What makes The Truth so appealing is that there's humor in his dialogue and his personality. Often, a conspiracy theorist can be a very angry character and, therefore, off-putting to some. A hippie who smokes marijuana, or "Temple Charas," as The Truth prefers, isn't to everyone's taste.

But The Truth is such a likable character. Look at how CJ reacts to him throughout the story. At first, he thinks The Truth is a weirdo and even says, "Later, freak." He loses his temper briefly when driving himself and The Truth to San Fierro in the Mothership. The Truth then has to calmly tell CJ to chill.

But if you do the "Test Drive" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_XoYVGFsoc) mission, you'll see CJ has warmed up to The Truth. Cesar expresses that he thinks The Truth is weird, whereas CJ says that he feels there is some validity to some of the things he says. Clearly, CJ feels The Truth is strange throughout, but he's willing to **steal a jetpack** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1cXWkG0uqs>) and **green goo** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdnPq5P4BrA>) from the military for him, so clearly, the weed-crazy hippie has done something right!

What's the lesson for writers? The Truth succeeds because he's able to say a lot of humorous things with complete conviction. When he's asked if he's sick, he responds with 'no, the government is.' This is said in a straightforward, almost listless manner, yet it is one of the funniest responses from the game. Like CJ, The Truth has been

pushed around by authority, and his desire to go against ‘the man’ is what makes him appealing. A rebellious character who also makes you laugh. Comic brilliance!

While it took time for CJ to warm up to The Truth, he was immediately taken by another character whom you wouldn’t expect him to ever come across. Of course, it’s all thanks to winning a race that CJ met Wu Zi Mu, or Woozie.



Source: GTA.Fandom.com

Wu Zi Mu is the leader of a branch of the Triads known as the Mountain Cloud Boys. His friends call him “Woozie” which is a brilliant touch from the writers. This affectionate nickname immediately hooks a player/audience to a story. A name like Carl isn’t always memorable. But CJ is. Melvin Harris isn’t always easy to remember but you don’t forget Big Smoke. Nor will you forget OG Loc, as Jeffrey prefers to be called.

Of course, what really makes Woozie appealing is that he’s trained his senses to do almost anything, except swimming. He’s had to since he’s blind, despite the fact that we first meet him after CJ beats him in a car race in the hilly terrain of the countryside!

How did the writers make Woozie such an appealing character? There are many factors that make him likable. One is that he has impeccable manners, which is a welcome contrast to other characters who can be extremely crude – Pulaski, for

instance! He's also loyal. CJ meets him in the countryside and then meets him again in San Fierro much later. Then, much after that, they meet again in Las Venturas.

Woozie recognizes CJ's talents and offers him opportunities. His blissful unawareness of how his gang accommodates his blindness is both hilarious and touching. The fact that he feels CJ is "bad luck" for him when they play Blackjack (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idILNUv-Z14>) is an example.

Of course, when Woozie needs to be tough and shoot at opposing gang members, he can. His appeal is that he is so kind at one moment that he tells Kendl to say 'people of reduced stature' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MojJzFpxBy4>) rather than 'midget', and in another moment, he's ready to take on the Da Nang Boys with a machine gun! This sharp contrast makes him one of the most well-written characters in the game.

Woozie's Best Moments (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7B-pu-TsqQ>)
Interview with Woozie's voice actor, James Yaegashi
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBznX8SjBQ4>)

While CJ is always happy to pick up Woozie's calls, there's always tension and frustration when Toreno calls.



Source: GTA.Fandom.com

When CJ first meets Mike Toreno, it's after a shootout where he has to rescue him with T-Bone Mendez's help. Before you meet Toreno, you wonder what type of personality he'll have. He was kidnapped, so is he a weak character who can easily be taken advantage of? As soon as CJ rescues him, we realize that this isn't the case at all. This shows the sharp and quick writing that we see when he's introduced.

When Toreno gets out of the van, he doesn't say, "Thanks, T-Bone." He instead says, "About time, T-Bone..." Then, upon seeing CJ, he draws his gun, and asks, "Who the fuck is this?"

Throughout the story, you know that Toreno is not a man to be messed with – and he's never afraid to exert his authority. He isn't afraid to let CJ know that he owns him until CJ fulfills all his tasks for him. As mentioned earlier, if CJ doesn't complete the **Flight School mission** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jf0EH7ZfT1c>) in one session, Toreno will call him telling him to "learn...to...fly!" and in one of the calls, he'll threaten to introduce Sweet (who's still in prison) to Horse Cock Harry!

His language is often aggressive and cold. When he gives CJ an assignment, he'll mention that sometimes, the good guys have to die. When CJ feels stressed, he'll often get taunted by Toreno, who is merciless with his humor: "Ooh what a big whiner, you want some cheese with that wine? "

However, despite these taunts and his coldness, Toreno is also a popular character who many players love. It's because he also has his principles. He gives CJ jobs because he believes in him. He tries to assure CJ, at times, that he'll be home for a "blowjob and a bologna sandwich" and even compliments him. When finishing the **N.O.E.** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9D3n3RM1CJQ>) mission, Toreno says, "Nice going Carl, really, you did good kid."

The last time we see Toreno is when he gives CJ his final mission – to pick up Sweet who's just been released from prison. This is truly a great moment that shows us that beneath that dark humor and tough exterior, Toreno is a man of principles.

The lesson in here is that you must humanize a character so that the player/audience loves them. It's easy to find Toreno cold and manipulative because he is. Not to mention, many players find some of his missions to be the hardest – one feels CJ's pain when he screams, "FUCK YOU, TORENO! I never want to go through this again!"

It's also great to balance dark humor with serious lines. Toreno has serious lines mixed with dark humor which is why he's entertaining.

He even has a few silly lines:

"Carl, I will always be watching, or listening – or both."

"Nobody is watching anybody watching nobody. Know what I mean?"

Toreno: "Once you're on the inside, I cannot help you."

Carl: "Well, can you help me now?"

Toreno: "Uh, well, no. Actually, no."

While Toreno helped CJ, our protagonist also had a hand in helping three other characters: a fairly normal music producer, a rapper who couldn't control his urges, and a neurotic lawyer.



Source: GTA Series Videos (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOOsq_dUyyk)

Kent Paul, Maccerr, and Ken Rosenberg have a minor presence in the middle of the story and then appear again in the final cutscene of the game. Nevertheless, they're not only three of the most entertaining characters in the story but also work to elevate CJ's character arc.

The Truth calls CJ and says that he had a trip with a couple of Brits, and he can't recall what happened next. CJ goes to the desert to find Paul and Maccerr, and hilarity ensues. The dialogue and tension between the two are funny, and later, they have an important role as they work with Madd Dogg to record his new album. But the main attraction of this duo is that they provide extra comic relief.

The GTA stories are all dark due to the world they revolve around. The comedy is what eases the tension and makes the gameplay more enjoyable to a wider audience.

Of course, narrative-wise, CJ meeting Paul and Maccerr helps him gain access to Caligula's, the casino he **plans to rob** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iiAAu3V1ww>).

The writing lesson here is that the writers didn't waste these minor but important characters. Lesser writers would make one or two dry characters to help the main character gain access to the casino. Using Paul and Maccerr and making them a comedy double act shows the brilliance of the writers.

Even if their overall screentime is minor, had they been boring characters, it would feel as if their segment had dragged on. Even a few minutes of boredom can slow the pacing of a story and make it irritating for the player/audience.

Of course, Paul and Maccer also introduce CJ to Rosenberg. The neurotic lawyer introduces CJ to the mafia boss, Salvatore Leone, who owns Caligula's. Rosenberg plays a crucial role in helping CJ figure out how to win Salvatore's trust – which CJ will betray when he robs the casino.

Rosenberg is a character first introduced in *GTA: Vice City*, as Tommy Vercetti's lawyer. While still neurotic as he was in that game, he's washed up in this game. As he explains, he was addicted to drugs and lost everything – even having to go to a rehabilitation center.

His neuroticism is also comic relief. However, like many of the other supporting characters, Rosenberg is used to showcase CJ's growing confidence and status. Consider when he's having a panic attack and CJ gives him **a pep talk** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omOhXP4KXhw>), letting him know that he has to take control and that he's the boss!

The writers did a great job of reintroducing a character that we saw in another game. While Catalina appears in GTA III, that game takes place after the events of this game, so we see an earlier version of her. For Rosenberg, we have to imagine what happened to him six years after the events of Vice City.

If you have to write about an existing character in the future, you'll need to give the audience something new that they didn't see the first time – in this case, Rosenberg being a lawyer for the mafia. You've also got to show them something familiar about the character – Rosenberg is just as neurotic as he was in Vice City.

CJ not only rescues Kent Paul, Maccer, and Rosenberg from Salvatore's clutches, but he even finds them a gig. He gives them this gig after he becomes the manager of someone who's life he helped ruin—Madd Dogg!



Source: GTA.Fandom.com

While Loc likes to think of himself as the OG (Original Gangsta) we know that the real OG is Madd Dogg. How fitting that the character was voiced by rapper and actor Ice-T, who **coined the term!** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scILa5iPBcg>)

The interesting thing about Madd Dogg is that he's a minor character and we only see him as we get into the final act of the story. It's because of him that CJ decides to return to Los Santos, to help the rapper take back his mansion which was seized by the drug lord Big Poppa – whose name could possibly be a reference to the rapper Notorious B.I.G.

We first learn of Madd Dogg when OG Loc asks CJ to steal his rhyme book from his mansion. What's interesting about this sequence is that Madd Dogg isn't seen at all. But, his presence *is felt* from this mission. You get an impression of the man without ever seeing him.

It's clear from the size of the mansion and the number of machine-gun-wielding bodyguards that Madd Dogg is a superstar. He's clearly someone who's at the top, and as a result, it's truly a fall from grace for him after CJ steals the rhyme book.

You have an impression that Madd Dogg is powerful, almost like a mafia boss. Then, when we see him for the first time, **it's a sad scene** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4bkUcsKy1c>). CJ comes across Madd Dogg in Las Venturas and sees that he's trying to jump off a building to kill himself. No doubt, feeling guilty for what he did to the rapper, CJ saves him and takes him to a rehabilitation center. They remain in touch and CJ eventually becomes Madd Dogg's new manager – since CJ had **killed the previous manager!** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXpLIJfsoWo>)

After CJ takes back his mansion and gets his rhyme book back after confronting OG Loc, Madd Dogg is able to revive his rap career. You feel genuinely happy when he shows off the gold record in the final cutscene!

The writers have shown us how to create a presence for a character. We have an idea of who Madd Dogg is without seeing him. When we finally do see him in a drunken stupor on a casino's roof, ready to jump off, we feel shocked. When he and CJ confront OG Loc, his tone has changed. When he tells CJ that Big Poppa has seized his mansion, we see CJ scolding him, but he doesn't protest. When he comes face-to-face with OG Loc, he gains back his confidence. When he shows off the gold record, we see the Madd Dogg, who's always been the true OG.

While CJ must have felt he's atoned for his sins by helping Madd Dogg, his final encounter with Pulaski was truly satisfying, with the latter getting his just desserts – and in the desert!



Source: [GTA.Fandom.com](https://www.gta-fandom.com)

Officer Eddie Pulaski is likely one of the most unlikable characters in the GTA franchise, which is a testament to the brilliant writing as well as Chris Penn's voice performance.

Pulaski is a sidekick, but he clearly has an ego that might mask an inferiority complex. He wants to always assert his authority – almost as if he always wants Tenpenny to respect him. **Early in the game** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8xVFyRakyE>), Tenpenny calls Ryder a boy which angers him. Tenpenny's response is "Well, what should I call you? Midget?" Pulaski interjects with "How about prick?" Tenpenny decides to call Ryder exactly that.

We frequently see Pulaski having bouts of anger. While Tenpenny has a range of emotions and can speak in an aggressive or calm tone and even make a joke here and there, Pulaski seems to always assert his presence through his violent tone.

This shows in the **"Snail Trail"** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nC9zUfKIFag>) mission where Pulaski talks about the reporter who doesn't know "that he's supposed to report what he's supposed to report!" Pulaski also never seems to speak politely to CJ,

whereas even Tenpenny has a few moments of speaking nicely, although this is just his style – as he sees CJ as his pawn and nothing else.

CJ finally goes after Pulaski in the mission, **“High Noon”** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj_ymQ3o_yU) in which Tenpenny tries to kill Officer Hernandez and wants Pulaski to kill CJ. During the cutscene, after Hernandez has been knocked out, CJ has to dig a grave for the both of them. CJ tells Pulaski that Tenpenny is using him and that he’s next on the hit list – even calling him “Eddie.”

We then see Pulaski’s insecurity: he gets enraged by CJ’s insinuation and tells him to “shut the fuck up” and demands that he be addressed as “Officer Pulaski.” Hernandez, not dead after all, gets up and tries to save CJ – who is then able to chase after Pulaski.

During the chase, we get one final look at the vulgarity and viciousness of Pulaski – as well as his weakness. At first, CJ tells “Eddie” that Tenpenny will kill him next. Pulaski responds by saying that CJ is wrong, and that Tenpenny wanted to keep CJ alive for the longest, whereas he wanted to kill CJ as quickly as possible and that he wasn’t as soft.

During the chase, Pulaski taunts CJ by making vulgar remarks about Kendl. But what really enrages CJ, is when Pulaski makes even more vulgar remarks about CJ’s mother. This angers CJ immensely.

Once you finish this mission, you will see one of the most satisfying cut scenes ever. We finally see Pulaski in a moment of true weakness – as he’s bleeding to death while resting against his car. And yet, even here, he manages to make one more offensive remark about Kendl that pisses off CJ. When CJ stomps Pulaski, you feel that his story has come to a fitting conclusion.

The writers did a fantastic job at creating a side villain with Pulaski. A good side villain often tries to assert their authority – as if trying to outdo the main villain. The dialogue that Pulaski uses is also perfect for making him unlikable. Of course, it’s an art to be able to write crass dialogue without making it cringe and self-indulgent. The writers have managed to perfect this art with Pulaski.

But of course, the ultimate victory happens when a firetruck loses control and CJ exclaims, “We got the motherfucker!”



Source: [GTA.Fandom.com](https://www.gta-fandom.com/)

In the classic British sitcom, **“The Thin Blue Line”** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112194/>) Detective Inspector Derek Grim has a breakdown in one episode when he comes to terms with the fact that he approved planting evidence to **catch a drug dealer** (<https://youtu.be/eumJF1A2Kfk?t=1749>). He says, “There is nothing lower than a bent copper [corrupt police officer].”

This might be the reason why Officer Frank Tenpenny is often considered to be the best villain in the GTA franchise.

How did the writers do it? Introducing a villain in the opening sequence is a brilliant way to establish who the player/audience should be against. We see a range of emotions with Tenpenny, but what remains consistent is that he’s remorseless and that he believes he is above everyone else.

In the "Burning Desire" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGQ-xQ5SZK0>) mission, Tenpenny speaks almost affectionately to CJ – by calling him “son” and asking him to come over to the booth. Yet, within moments he also instills fear in CJ – letting him know not to mess with C.R.A.S.H.

In “Misappropriation” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwt5NU28sF8>) he doesn’t hesitate to punch CJ, when the latter questions his seriousness.

Even when Tenpenny is dying, he shows no regrets for what he has done to the city – stating that no one could understand why he did what he did. He can sometimes be funny, sometimes calm, and sometimes aggressive. But at all times, he’s menacing.

“...this may be my last chance to get heard!”

How to Write Dialogue

If there's one constant throughout all the characters, including the pedestrians in *GTA: San Andreas*, it's that they have brilliant dialogue. Often, writing dialogue is one of the biggest hurdles for writers.

How do you write engaging dialogue? How do you prevent it from sounding monotonous? Can you make it realistic? Can you make it funny? Does your dialogue make your characters seem like talking heads?

These are the questions that dialogue writers ask themselves when they write and rewrite dialogue, wondering if they'll ever get it right.

What is it about the dialogue of *GTA: San Andreas* that just works? Why is it that 20 years later, we're still quoting Big Smoke's order by heart?

Here's why it works:

Authenticity

The characters in *GTA: San Andreas* are as diverse as one could imagine. You can expect CJ to meet OG Loc, Madd Dogg, Tenpenny, Pulaski, and the pimp Jizzy B. These are standard characters for the setting.

However, one wonders what went through the writers' minds when they decided to tell a story about African-American and Latino-American gangbangers in a fictional Los Angeles that would also include:

- A hippie
- Chinese Triads
- Vietnamese Gangsters
- An agent for some government department that we'll never know about
- A nerd who fights his nemesis with RC planes
- A band manager from Kent (albeit with a Cockney accent)
- A Mancunian rapper and
- A neurotic Jewish lawyer
- Oh, and let's not forget the Italian-American mobsters!

And there's much more than this bunch! With such an eclectic cast, writers have to write dialogue that suits the demographic.

For example, CJ, his family, and the Grove Street characters speak in the slang that's common among African-American communities in inner cities.

There will be no hesitation in using profanity, including racial slurs, when needed. OG Loc, being a “rapper,” has to throw in his rhymes every now and then to suit his dream of becoming a star.

Cesar uses his own slang, which is common among Mexican-American communities in the area. He regularly uses “holmes” rather than “homie.”

Of course, he and his compatriots will also throw in Spanish every now and then – such as screaming “HASTA LA MUERTE!” (“UNTIL DEATH!”) when they're ready to fight the Vagos to take back their neighborhood.

A hippie and conspiracy theorist like The Truth often speaks in riddles or just says things beyond a layman's comprehension. Plus, he'll use the correct language when meditating, chanting “Om” twice during the story and greeting others with “Namaste.” When he and CJ have to burn his marijuana stocks, he hopes that Gaia will forgive them.

He doesn't hesitate to criticize the system when needed – saying that the government is sick. He discusses how there are 23 religious relics in the Pentagon and the same number of satellites spying on each citizen at any time. He even gets forgetful at times – such as not remembering **how he and Jethro first met** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSi9qFks6vU>).

Woozie has a gentle way of speaking but nevertheless manages to exert his authority. However, his occasional chuckles such as when he beats CJ in a video game make him the most likable criminal mastermind in the story! While he speaks entirely in English, there are occasional moments where he uses the appropriate lingo for the Triads – letting CJ know that he is the Dai Dai Lo of the Mountain Cloud Boys, for instance.

In keeping with his being blind, the writers include some funny moments – such as when he checks for the loose pebble to know his location. Another example is during the casino heist when he runs into a wall and his response is “the devious bastards have changed the layout!” However, he is still a Triad leader and isn't afraid to be aggressive – cursing excessively when we first see him at The Four Dragons Casino and then hurling insults when shooting at the Da Nang gangsters when he finds out that they've wiped out many members of his gang.

The relationship between CJ and Zero shows their contrasting personalities and is maybe one of the best ways to portray their authenticity. CJ doesn't even try to pretend to understand Zero's nerdiness. Likewise, Zero doesn't even try to pretend to be tough in front of CJ. When he meets CJ after the latter has bought the RC shop, he informs him of his **rivality with Berkley** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN6k0pAmyvM>). CJ wonders

why this rivalry started and then suggests it's because Zero "put hands on him" or "knocked his bitch."

Zero doesn't pretend that either of these is true – and says the truth: that Berkley hates him because he won the first prize at the science fair! Zero is an excellent caricature of a nerd who doesn't try to act cool – even admitting that "sex is the last thing on his mind!"

The relationship between Kent Paul and Maccer is another gem of authenticity. Since the minds behind the GTA franchise are British, one can always expect to see a few Britishisms here and there. What's great is that they didn't try to "Americanize" Kent Paul and Maccer to make them more accessible to an international audience who might not always be familiar with their style of speaking.

The first time **Kent Paul speaks** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k555u5anmto>) he says, "Stone me bloody crows, where am I?" This comes from the English phrase, "stone the crows," which is a general exclamation when one is annoyed. Maccer uses many English expressions, like referring to CJ as a "twat" and constantly referring to his self-pleasuring escapades by the proper term: "wanking!"

Plus, he once refers to Paul as "our P," while Kent Paul gets irritated by Maccer on several occasions and twice says, "fucking Northerners!" He also doesn't understand what Maccer is talking about when the latter says the snake farm in the desert reminds him of Salford.

The writers don't worry whether Americans, for example, will understand this lingo or the references – this authenticity is what makes these characters more appealing and makes the story more believable.

And, it has to be said, the dialogue of the **hillbillies at the snake farm** (https://youtu.be/TOOsq_dUyyk?t=378) is absurdly funny and "**Body Harvest**," is one of the best missions just because one of the survivalists screams: "**STOP THAT DANG VARMINT!**" (<https://youtu.be/tFR1cjlXbc?t=421>)

Catchphrases, Poetry, Quotables

When writing characters whom you'll see over a long story, you might want to consider creating lines that they'll repeat. Or you can choose certain ways of speaking that become their trademarks.

For example, Big Smoke often quotes from "the book." He says lines such as:

"Like it says in the book...we are both blessed and cursed."

"Same things make us laugh, make us cry."

Yo, eh eh, don't ask a wise man, friend. Ask a fool.

Big Smoke is also aware of his persona and sometimes refers to himself in the third person:

“Here get yourself a lil smokey smoke on Smoke...”

“Hey – excuso me, José, yo soy El Grando Smokio...”

“Yeah, motherfucker! Big Smoke, remember that name!”

“When I’m gone, everyone gonna remember my name...Big Smoke!”

Big Smoke loves to joke about himself at times and isn’t afraid to make a comeback when someone criticizes him. In fact, he can even make jokes during the most stressful situations:

“C’mon CJ, you can’t keep up with the fat man?” (While Ballas are chasing after them)

“And that’s why you love me baby” (after Ryder complains that Big Smoke ate all the food)

“Point taken. I’ll keep my mouth shut from now on.” (After CJ says, “Yeah, who being negative now, bitch?” while the Russian gangsters are shooting at them)

“I wish I’d have stayed home and watched the fucking game!” (While the cops are shooting at them)

“Maybe if you have a nice word with these officers, they’ll let us on our way!” (Same as above!)

He also isn’t afraid of scolding someone to express his annoyance:

“You picked the wrong house, fool!”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzJDE7BaXyY>)

“All we had to do was follow the damn train, CJ!”

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF3GK_sfPVM)

Finally, Big Smoke’s weight leads to him saying some of the most iconic lines in video game history:

“I’ll have two number 9s, a number 9 large, a number 6 with extra dip, a number 7, two number 45s, one with cheese, and a large soda.”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3cvmtPuvXo>)

If you’ve made it this far, you ain’t no busta!

Another technique employed by the writers is using certain words several times throughout the story. For this masterclass, we’ve got to analyze the word **“busta”** used so often throughout the story—it’s almost a trademark of the game.

Ryder often uses this word to taunt CJ—telling him that he’s the **“Same old CJ! Busta! Straight busta!”** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYQuyulTLCs>)

When it comes time to reunite the families, the police enter the Jefferson Motel while Sweet is in there having a meeting to bring the Grove Street gang together. Big Smoke and Ryder suggest bailing, but CJ insists on saving his brother, stating that he ain't no busta!

When CJ and Madd Dogg chase OG Loc, the latter refers to Madd Dogg as a “drunk ass busta!” When you finally catch up with him, the tables turn, and Madd Dogg calls OG Loc a busta to his face.

Something as simple as repeating this word adds to mood and energy of the story. An example from cinema, would be how often the words “baby, money, honey, gorgeous, and Vegas” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrErSgrwXE>) are repeated from the film *Swingers* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117802>).

Don't Say Everything

“Brevity is the soul of wit” as Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*. Perhaps he predicted the story of *GTA: San Andreas* centuries later and wanted to offer some early advice. Ok, that's going too far, but the writers certainly took a lesson from him.

Since the story is a visual medium and an interactive one at that, you'll notice that many cutscenes give you a basic idea of what'll happen next. Rather than having characters give long monologues with instructions, we're given just the basics.

For example, after completing the mission “**Ryder,**” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbqKA7cYCQM>) CJ drops Ryder back to his house. Ryder mentions that Sweet has been yapping about the graffiti – and then he enters his home and the mission ends. Ryder doesn't say that we need to do something about the graffiti made by the Ballas gang on Grove Street territory – we don't find out this is the plan until the **next mission** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRduC_IkmFA).

In “**Gray Imports,**” (<https://youtu.be/-X07e-40hQY?t=59>) Tenpenny tells CJ that a lot of “cheap guns have come into America since the fall of the wall.” When CJ, annoyed, asks Tenpenny to get to the point – Tenpenny still doesn't give the full instructions. He only tells him to go to the freight warehouse at the docks to see what he means. Only when you play the mission do you learn that CJ has to kill a Russian arms dealer. Not giving away the instructions in the cutscene leaves the audience wanting more – not knowing what to anticipate.

In the mission “**Highjack,**” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhPlsfV2DvY>) Toreno tells CJ that there's a rival agency and that he needs to commandeer a truck. He requests that CJ call Cesar as the job is a “two-man job” and that's it. We don't learn about the actual instructions until the mission begins. Even in the cutscene where Cesar arrives at the ranch, they don't discuss the assignment.

Only as the mission starts and CJ drives Cesar to the freeway does he mention that they have to hijack an oil tanker!

Another example is in “**Fender Ketchup,**”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2SJwOka3IE>) the cutscene ends with CJ requesting that the mobster be tied to the front of the car and that he’d be down in five minutes. He doesn’t tell Woozie or anyone else what he plans to do with the mobster, and we don’t receive the instructions until the mission starts.

Focusing on minimal dialogue at first and spreading it out makes for a more interesting narrative.

Gameplay Dialogue

It’s easy to absorb the dialogue while watching a cutscene, but how do the writers ensure the player/audience focuses on the dialogue when there’s a lot of action?

When you’re trying to get to the veteran’s apartment before daylight, how do you pay attention to CJ and Ryder’s bickering? While Russian gangsters are shooting at you with machine guns, how do you pay attention to the hilarious exchange between CJ and Big Smoke as they’re trying to escape?

As a first-time player, it’s unlikely you’ll absorb all the gameplay dialogue when you play each mission. However, when you play several times, you’ll revel in the richness of the dialogue even while a mission is going on.

The key is that the dialogue should have some relevance to the action or should push the story forward.

For example, when CJ and Cesar try to hijack the tanker, the latter keeps telling CJ to match the truck’s speed to get closer to it and that he is **not a Mexican jumping bean!** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Xl6dQ1srxg>)

When CJ is driving after the Ballas to catch them before they get to Grove Street, Sweet, and Ryder are shooting at them. Curiously, Big Smoke is too focused on eating his food (and Ryder’s) instead of shooting.

This **hilarious exchange** (<https://youtu.be/E1aTIYlfzRk?t=144>) while the gang is trying to eliminate the Ballas before it’s too late is a perfect contrast to the tension. However, it also foreshadows where Big Smoke’s true loyalty lies. Was he really just trying to enjoy his meal or was he trying to avoid killing Ballas?

In these three scenarios, humor eases the tension of the gameplay. But in the last example, it also makes us question Big Smoke, carrying the narrative further. There are many more

examples, which you'll be able to discover for yourself when you play the game several times.

NPC Dialogue

One could play the game several times over several years and still not even experience a fraction of the brilliant NPC dialogue. It's so vast and adds a richness to the game.

Quick side note: *If you want to have some fun, play the “OG Loc” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTRK2yz_nwg) mission. After killing Freddy, get into a car with OG Loc, and before you reach Burger Shot, damage the car (with both of you inside) until it catches fire. The hilarious dialogue from OG Loc is worth it.*

The pedestrians in the game are the equivalent of extras in a film. But most extras in a film seem to walk around without audible or intelligible dialogue. However, the NPC dialogue in this game adds to the immersive experience. NPCs can interact with CJ as he walks past, ranging from friendly to angry to flirtatious. You'll hear some vicious but hilarious dialogue if he becomes fat.

So, what can a writer learn from this? It shows that the best dialogue doesn't always have to go to the main characters. Even a minor character or someone with only one line can be utilized well.

For example, when CJ goes to the Cluckin' Bell, the worker can say some of the most absurd things when he buys food—including “hope you choke-a-doodle-doo!” Think of how much more creative this is than something bland like “have a nice day!” which is what we always hear fast food workers say. If you're having to wear a ridiculous chicken costume and serve bad-quality food, “have a nice day!” isn't going through your mind!

Girlfriend Dialogue

A quick mention of the hysterical dialogue from CJ's girlfriends should be made. Here are a few examples:

Denise (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KNo23b4AFI>)

- “I had three children, but I gave them away.”
- “CJ, quit tripping!”
- “CJ, relax dawg!”
- “Faster fool!”
- “Oh well done, you busta!”
- “We upside down, fool!” (when your car flips over)
- “CJ you such a bitch!”
- “Got one-time on us!”
- “Let's see what you got Romeo!”

- “We can’t park here fool!”
- “I am completely worthless, don’t you think?”

Millie (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gpRqD-t83c)

- “Take it easy buster!”
- “Watch out, you great oaf!”
- “Carl, don’t you care about your car?”
- “Oh my god, I can’t feel my legs!”
- “What do you think I am, one of your other ho’s?”
- “You insane, delinquent idiot!”
- “I could get there faster on foot!”
- “I’m dying, let’s go out to eat!”
- “Come into my dungeon you naughty boy!”
- “Geriatrics have given me a better time!”

Katie (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8LS5Ebis04>)

- “Shit that was good!”
- “CJ you’re insane, I love you!”
- “You’re the worst driver ever, I love it!”
- “You’re mad CJ, I love it!”
- “Faster you little wimp, faster!”
- “Oh, I love it, we’re on fire!”
- “So close to death, yet so alive!”
- “OG Loc? More like OG Joke!”
- “Wow look at all that blood!”
- “Holy Crap!” (She says this if you do a stunt. In cinematic view, she’ll say it in slow motion)
- “Speed it up CJ, I’m falling asleep!”
- “I warn you I’m a black belt!”
- “Gosh, well, aren’t we having a good time?”

Michelle (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSMVLwYLQwE>)

- “CJ, you crazy idiot!”
- “Trying to impress, huh?”
- “How do you win so many races?”
- “Try to drive normal!”
- “You call this fast?”
- “Is that all you got CJ?”
- “Oh fuck, you lunatic!”
- “CJ you are too crazy not to love!”
- “Watch the pedestrians!”
- “Yeah, I’m free falling for you!”

- “We’re in for a chase now!”
- “Make ‘em eat our dust CJ!”
- “Quit driving like my grandma!”
- “What am I, invisible or something?”

Helena (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzaQvnAZHns>)

- “Hey, you want me to shoot you?”
- “You oaf! Calm down!”
- “Stop doing that or I’ll shoot you in the head!”
- “You trying to annoy me, genius?”
- “Stop crashing the car you fool!”
- “I’m a lawyer! Slow down!”
- “We’re upside down you idiot!”
- “Ah, upside down, wonderful!”
- “You maniac! I’m a lawyer!”
- “I’m a high flyer, but not like this!”
- “I can’t get caught, I’m a lawyer!”
- “My career is ruined!”
- “Carl, are you trying to bore me to death?”

Barbara (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kCBFSuprhA>)

- “Do you have a current driver’s license?”
- “You’re breaking the law, slow down!”
- “Isn’t this speed a little irresponsible?”
- “CJ, slow down, I’m a cop!”
- “Well, that was an interesting date!”
- “You stupid, irresponsible bastard!”
- “I can lose my badge!”
- “CJ, I’ll arrest you myself!”
- “What is it with you and law breaking?”
- “This whole desert is crawling with CIA!” (Toreno?)
- “Crime figures have shot up all over the state!”
- “We had a plane crash over by The Big Ear” (This refers to CJ’s plane crashing when he jumps out during the “**Dam and Blast**” (<https://youtu.be/MTVVq-Ssj34>) mission)
- “I could shoot you, and no one would say a thing!”
- “Great fun, but Cinderella needs to get back!”
- “What are you doing citizen?”

These small details show that the writing team didn’t want to waste any dialogue. Even a few one-liners here and there by NPCs should entertain the player. Consider taking the same approach when writing dialogue for minor characters in your work.

“Now, I know you blind man, but you gotta see this!”

How to Write for a Visual Medium

One of the reasons why the dialogue doesn't have to be overly verbose at all times is because that's the rule for visual mediums. If you've never written for a visual medium, you'll soon find that it's quite tough to “show, don't tell.”

The mission “**Explosive Situation**,”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bTyEgnwWL8>) shows Woozie hitting a golf ball trying to land it directly into a cup. The Triad member holding the cup steps back and aligns it with the ball's direction so that it goes in. Upon hearing the sound of the ball going into the cup, Woozie smiles and says, “Ha ha ha, the glorious sound of a hole in one!”

The visual of a blind person even attempting golf gets you one laugh. The Triad member scurrying backward to align the cup gets another one. And finally, Woozie's quick line gets a third laugh.

When we find out Toreno isn't dead after all, he sneaks up behind CJ in two missions. The first time, he scares CJ who then apologizes and cowers in fear in front of him. Later, after learning to fly, Toreno sneaks up on CJ and grabs him – later remarking that he could have killed him in nine different ways.

This small detail of showing Toreno sneaking up on CJ shows how menacing he is and helps assert his authority. When we see Toreno, we have to see someone who's more powerful than CJ – and who can control him.

OG Loc is funny not just because of his dialogue but because of his body language as well. In the “**Life's a Beach**,” (<https://youtu.be/zCZwFfd3gZU?t=37>) mission, his quick dance when he says, “that's me, OG Loc baby!” adds to the humor. When CJ meets OG Loc in the bathroom to discuss stealing Madd Dogg's rhyme book, he also begins to dance while rapping. His dance in the “**House Party**” (<https://youtu.be/eXv-6cD1aWg?t=78>) mission while rapping his famous lines, also adds to the humor of the lyrics themselves.

Writing for a visual medium also includes descriptions of the characters, the action, and the setting. While the director, director of photography, animator, etc., will also influence this, a writer can play a part in designing the visuals of each scene.

Here are a few (there are so many!) memorable visual elements from the story:

- **Big Smoke finds CJ** (<https://youtu.be/OpTizzox2Qo?t=383>) (the first major surprise of the game)

- **CJ and Ryder turn their heads while Big Smoke orders** (<https://youtu.be/E1aTlYlfzRk?t=92>)
- **The truck with Russians** (<https://youtu.be/fV0M7nKRn7s?t=257>) (inspired by Terminator 2)
- **Driving up the ramp of that truck** (<https://youtu.be/fV0M7nKRn7s?t=334>)
- **The police chopper arriving at the Jefferson Motel – creating suspense** (<https://youtu.be/q5gz81wYoHI?t=128>)
- **The car flies through the billboard and hits the tanker!** (<https://youtu.be/q5gz81wYoHI?t=502>)
- **The beautiful opening shot of Mount Chilliad and the town in “Badlands”** (<https://youtu.be/ULJfilx8inA?t=3>)
- **Woozie extending his hand without anyone in front of him, inferring his blindness** (<https://youtu.be/x3b-FWMMTf8?t=46>)
- **The Truth often sits in meditative position** (<https://youtu.be/677sFuas9BQ?t=5>) (subtle detail that adds to his character)
- **Millie’s Bedroom** (<https://youtu.be/-EMYaQ8OT0w?t=558>) (Remember, NSFW!!!!)
- **Rosenberg saying he’s the boss!** (<https://youtu.be/omOhXP4KXhw?t=50>)
- **Johnny Sindacco’s heart attack** (<https://youtu.be/omOhXP4KXhw?t=225>)
- **The Molotov cocktail being thrown** (<https://youtu.be/omOhXP4KXhw?t=250>)
- **The burning crack house while CJ escapes** (<https://youtu.be/H5lj23EUR9U?t=1174>)
- **Tenpenny’s firetruck loses control** (<https://youtu.be/H5lj23EUR9U?t=1586>)
- **Pulling out the guns when some people come into the Johnson House** (<https://youtu.be/H5lj23EUR9U?t=1769>)

Setting the Scene

Watch the cutscenes to analyze specific sequences/shots. Even while you play the game, whether you’re doing a mission or roaming around, you can get an idea of how to write a setting.

The design of a scene isn’t solely the writer’s duty. As mentioned earlier, other team members such as the director, director of photography, animator, etc., will be involved in this. Nevertheless, when writing for a visual medium, try to describe the scene.

For example, it’s fitting that CJ arrives in Los Santos during the day. This lets us focus on the action in the opening sequence. The bright sun gives the player a basic idea of what Los Santos looks like. It’s also a nice contrast—we see a bright sunny day, while our protagonist has been arrested and framed for murder within a few minutes!

CJ starts the game wearing a tank top and jeans. This shows that he isn’t in the best condition – not wearing a full outfit and certainly not wearing Grove Street’s colors. The tank

top lets us see CJ's arms – and we can see that he starts off the game skinny – which attracts comments, notably from Sweet, who later tells him to hit the gym.

Some missions can only be started at nighttime – further adding to their mood. It's more suspenseful for CJ and The Truth to drive to the restricted area at night. It adds even more tension when CJ tries to sneak into the restricted area at night. Likewise, **“Amphibious Assault,”** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un4RL1nq4J4>) is a tense mission as CJ has to swim at night while evading the watchful eyes of the Da Nang gangsters. It wouldn't feel frightening if this mission began during the day.

In contrast, consider the mission, **“Wear Flowers in Your Hair.”** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSi9qFks6vU>) It's a pleasant drive where CJ and The Truth pick up Jethro, Dwaine, and Zero to hire them to work in the garage. It's also the mission that lets the player explore San Fierro. As a result, this mission takes place during the day – when the player can clearly see the scenery, buildings, and other characteristics that make up San Fierro.

Next time you play the game, pay closer attention to the details of the different areas of San Andreas. This will help you describe the location of any city, town, etc., that you create for your stories.

Here are a few things that stand out from the various locations in San Andreas:

Los Santos

- There's graffiti throughout the city – mostly in areas run by Grove Street and the Ballas
- The demographics of the city mostly seem to contain Black and Latino characters. Cops who drive are white, cops on motorcycles are black [This is constant in every area except the countryside where there are only white cops]
- The downtown reflects the wealth of the area – skyscrapers and apartments as opposed to only houses
- You'll see more luxury cars as well as limousines when entering the wealthier parts of Los Santos
- You'll see NPCs walking around in swimwear as soon as you're near the beach
- There's a distribution of gangsters from Grove Street, the Ballas, Aztecas, and Vagos throughout the city – so even as CJ drives around, it's very clear that various parts of the city are run by gangs
- The city is populated – except for small nooks and crannies, there always seems to be an abundance of people
- The railroad is easily accessible when close to the Johnson House
- Airport isn't immediately noticeable – you have to explore the city to find it if you're a new player

Countryside

- Wide spaces where you won't see an NPC or another vehicle
 - Though, in some parts of the countryside, there's a car (often damaged) just lying about – adding to the intrigue of the setting
- Large trees and bushes – at times these can obscure views
- Rivers in between the hollow of a mountain
- Tractors casually driving on the main roads
- Sanchez motorcycles (dirt bikes) spawning all over the place!
- Mostly white NPCs – reflecting accurate demographics, at least for the time period. Occasionally a black character is seen, and one NPC looks Native American
- Combine Harvesters seen on farms
- Trailers and trailer parks
- Smaller Ammu-nations – compared to the giant one in Los Santos
 - Small shops in general
- Suburban houses – mostly with garages
- Some houses deep in the countryside, away from main streets, with no neighbors
- Wide roads with twists and turns
- The railroad is distant
- No airport

San Fierro

- Many skyscrapers
- Luxury hotels
- Wide roads that are steep
- Wealthier cars
- The strongest vehicle in the game – the unbeatable tram!
- Large police presence in cars and on motorcycles
- Airport isn't too far from main streets
- The railroad is easily accessible
- The city is built on levels – the airport, naval base, docks, and Jizzy B's club on the lowest level, for instance
- Chinatown is tucked in the city, easy to drive past and not notice
- The bridge that looks like the Golden Gate Bridge
- The Pride flags showing the progressive liberal attitude of the city
- Mixed demographics including Triad members roaming around Chinatown
- Apartments and condominiums

Desert

- Motels and inns

- Ghost towns such as Aldea Malvada and Las Brujas
- An abandoned cemetery (where Officer Hernandez is killed)
- Wide roads with twists and turns
- No airport, but an abandoned airstrip until CJ buys it
- The giant mechanical chicken, teepees, and rotating UFO displays
- Dying trees and minimal foliage
- Large rock formations
- Areas where you mostly see trucks and vans
- Areas where you won't see anyone else
- No pedestrians – just commuters driving through
- And of course: The Restricted Area

Las Venturas

- The Strip with one casino/hotel after the next
- Shopping plazas such as where Millie stops to buy an outfit
- Mixed demographics including the most eclectic bunch
 - Elvis impersonators, senior citizens, prostitutes, etc. all enjoying the glamour
- Expensive cars and many fast cars
- Each casino has a unique design and theme
- The Strip isn't far from the freeway and isn't far from the desert
- Airport is near The Strip
- Suburban houses, mostly the same size, almost all have garages
- Large police presence

These are just some of the observations of each area, and there are countless others. By observing the settings of San Andreas, you can get an idea of how to create a setting for your stories. The more descriptive you are, the better blueprint you can provide a director, set designer, animator, etc.

“How Do I Look?” (Designing a Character’s Appearance)

A writer can play a part in describing the costumes for the character. While only CJ can wear a different outfit in the game, and you can customize him to your liking, a character's clothing showcases their personality. Furthermore, you can write *how* the characters look to add to their persona.

CJ and Sweet are dressed fairly normally and have average builds. Ryder is often considered short, and this becomes a recurring joke when we see him. He's clearly modeled after rapper Eazy-E – as he has a Jheri Curl, wears a hat with the name of his state, and is never seen without his sunglasses.

Big Smoke's distinctive appearance comes from his weight – as well as his glasses. While Sweet and Ryder wear regular caps, Big Smoke wears a bowler hat. This could perhaps be more of the British influence from the creators.

Cesar is always shown as the tough gangster that he is. He wears a tank top which shows off his muscles and tattoos. He wears the semi-formal pants that we've seen in other **depictions of cholos in California ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cholo_\(subculture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cholo_(subculture)))**. These are the pants that he bought in the same place where he bought his silenced pistol, of course.

You're reminded of Woozie's blindness because he's always seen with sunglasses on. You're reminded of his authority because he's always wearing the black suit.

OG Loc is made to look like a wannabe "gangsta." He's always shirtless, which shows off his tattoos and his muscles – as he's got "17s on the hang." This is what you'd expect from an actual tough guy. But this is contrasted with maroon-colored pants and the beanie he wears – which look more comical.

While video game graphics in *GTA: San Andreas* aren't as sophisticated or realistic as they are in *GTA V*, of course, his facial expressions make a huge difference in showing his true nature – **that he's a busta! (<https://youtu.be/EqOc-3DSnsY?t=415>)**

The Truth's appearance makes him appear as if he's still looking forward to the next performance at Woodstock. His grayish hair lets us know that he's stuck in a time warp. He's got casual hippie clothing, including the headband. This makes it seem that even if he were to show up at The Four Dragons Casino, he'd be wearing the same thing!

Jizzy B has one of the best looks in the story. His bright purple suit is exactly what you'd expect a pimp to look like. It makes a nice contrast to the other villainous and authoritative characters, who usually wear darker and less outlandish colors.

Kent Paul and Maccers's clothing is also reflective of their personalities. Paul wears a sleeveless top – indicating confidence to show off his arms, though they're quite slim. His hair is combed and slightly spiked. Basically, he's supposed to be the cooler of the two.

Maccers wears a bucket hat that almost conceals his eyes entirely. He's wearing an ordinary track jacket and jeans. This outfit lets you focus more on his personality and dialogue as it's not so distracting. But this ordinary outfit also tells us about him—that he's the bumbling one, not trying to be cool and making it clear that he's not the one in charge.

If you've played *GTA: Vice City*, then you'll know how Rosenberg's appearance shows his characters progression – or regression in this case.



A comparison of Rosenberg in 1986 in Vice City vs 1992 in San Andreas
Source: GTA.Fandom.com

As you can see, there's a huge contrast between his look over the course of six years. While he's neurotic in both stories, he clearly has a bit more confidence in Vice City. He has a full head of hair and a lavish soiree suit. He's appropriately dressed for the glitz that one would expect in the 80s in a city based on Miami.

When CJ meets him in Las Venturas, he doesn't exemplify any of the glamor associated with that city. His glasses are smaller and not as fashionable. His clothing is bland and lacks strong colors. He's lost most of his hair and is even more neurotic – even having a runny nose at the end when he **“comes in peace with Mr. Dogg!”**
(<https://youtu.be/H5lj23EUR9U?t=1797>)

“Mike can hear gulls!”

How to Write for Audio

The joy of playing *GTA: San Andreas* is that it's as much a fantastic audio experience as it is a visual experience. If you want to write for a solely audio medium such as an audio play, spoken word performance, etc., there's much to learn from this game.

Sound Effects

While CJ lurks in the shadows of Madd Dogg's mansion, he watches as the bodyguards walk by – hoping that they don't notice him. You'll hear him breathing heavily, which makes you feel the heightened tension that he feels. This is an excellent example of brilliant sound design.

While a collaborative project will have one or more sound designers, writers can describe the sounds to add to the mood of each scene. Think about some of the amazing moments when sound makes a difference to the story/game:

- The alarm goes off in “**Local Liquor Store,**” (<https://youtu.be/vhbvgk8oCQc?t=177>) after one of the thieves fires his gun. The constant ringing starts the tension. When Catalina shoots a thief, moments later, it's another loud noise from a machine gun. This adds to the impact and emphasizes the violent rage she has
- The constant alarm ringing in “**Black Project,**” (<https://youtu.be/B1cXWkG0uqs?t=398>) adds to the tension as CJ makes his way through the restricted area to steal the jetpack
- As a player, you'll feel a jump of stress each time you hear the alarm that triggers the visibility radar in “N.O.E.”
- The sound you hear when a rocket is fired at CJ when flying over the Restricted Area
- Sounds of any vehicle exploding
- The range of sound intensity with each weapon
- The revving sound of different vehicles

Next time you play the game, pay attention to how the different sound effects make you feel as you're playing. When writing your own content, you can describe sounds to help the audience feel more immersed in the narrative.

Music

One of the best experiences you'll have playing the *GTA* games is listening to the in-game radio stations as you play. Without a doubt, *GTA: San Andreas* has one of the best soundtracks from the franchise.

The player feels immersed in the game when driving through Los Santos and listening to

Radio Los Santos

(<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0TNLQ99PGPOLyHrDSGLXew?si=c7896d0e853a4ee2>) or **Playback FM**

(<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6qIFDrFGvSoBt3TrlghfC3?si=fcf576c6b2f046e1>).

Imagine listening to Snoop Doggy Dogg rap, “One Eight Seven on an undercover cop” while you know CJ is being pushed around by Tenpenny. There’s a pleasure listening to Big Daddy Kane and then when CJ stands idly, he **all of a sudden sings:**

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_9KavOEn_k) “Warm it up Kane! Warm it up CJ! Warm it up Kane!”

Then, you move to the countryside in the second act and all of a sudden the mood changes as you listen to **K-Rose**

(<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5pvCbBBh8keLlyDIWgeb69?si=44d840e5b17e4731>) while driving up Mount Chilliad with a Sanchez.

And just look at the brilliance of riding through the desert, as America sings “in the desert” from the song “A Horse with No Name,”:

CJ driving through the desert while listening to “A Horse with No Name”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1fkfEMoEq4>)

The game’s music is a combination of original compositions, such as the **theme song** (<https://open.spotify.com/track/724X0Tdkai2En19Vi1HGUH?si=11d7e7eae708492d>), and licensed songs. Having a great taste in existing music brings your scenes alive. In cinema, **Martin Scorsese** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3xasJFQayU>) and **Quentin Tarantino** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56hCn90XtqM>) have mastered this – opting to use songs they love in their films.

The narrative of *GTA: San Andreas* follows in the tradition of these two great filmmakers. For example, when CJ first meets Cesar, he must first pick up a lowrider from one of Sweet’s friends. If the song “**Lowrider**” by **WAR**

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsrqKE1iqqo>) plays when CJ gets in the car, it immerses the player into the world.

In the cutscene for “**King in Exile**,”

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_v3PMoMGns) we see Cesar embrace and kiss Kendl on her forehead. Meanwhile, “**Between the Sheets**,” by **The Isley Brothers**

(<https://open.spotify.com/track/3ApIYu95WxjzpqCnsLBbrv?si=327b0c9f57264af2>) is playing loudly in the background. One wonders if CJ walked in at the wrong time and interrupted something!

Likewise, you feel that you’re in the VIP section with Jizzy B as CJ tries to convince him to work WITH, I mean, FOR him. “**West Coast Poplock**” by **Ronnie Hudson**

(<https://open.spotify.com/track/4feA9qWutYe5V4MHLxtiVu?si=cdbd48b50c9d4450>) works perfectly for this scene – as it does during the lowrider challenge when CJ meets Cesar. **“Hollywood Swinging” by Kool and The Gang** (<https://open.spotify.com/track/4uILTONgn5XyPbOj9ACh1Z?si=2c02b4eafb6a48e3>) just works perfectly when CJ is dancing with the DJ during **“Life’s a Beach,”** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCZwFfd3gZU>) with the plan to steal the sound van for OG Loc.

When writing a scene for your stories, consider how music will affect the mood of the setting. Decide what emotions you’d like to convey in the scene, and consider which background songs will make it more powerful.

Radio

An entire guide can be written on the radio stations in the GTA franchise alone. In *GTA: San Andreas*, there are so many gems on the radio. Whether it’s the feud between **Julio G** (https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Julio_G) and **Forth Right MC** (https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Forth_Right_MC), the absurd banter from **Sage** (<https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Sage>) on Radio X, to **Mary-Beth Maybell** (https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Mary-Beth_Maybell) discussing her attraction to elderly men with life insurance policies, just driving around and blasting the radio is one of the joys of this game.

But to learn how these radio stations can improve your writing skills, let’s focus on the talk radio on WCTR.

I won’t discuss every segment from the station, rather, I’ll focus mainly on the news portions with **Lianne Forget** (https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Lianne_Forget) and **Richard Burns** (https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/Richard_Burns) – and briefly touch upon some of the other segments.

I’ll focus mainly on how WCTR adds to the narrative. The satire and humor from this station will be discussed in the next section.

Listen to WCTR

(<https://open.spotify.com/episode/4fGja2oi1oADD7VBbTbqmy?si=0a6888c4f49f4ce7>)

As the player progresses through the game, you’ll hear updates relating to the storyline (other radio stations such as K-Rose also do this – discussing CJ and Catalina robbing businesses).

Here are a few examples:

- The murder of Officer Pendelbury is mentioned throughout

- Both Tenpenny and Pulaski are discussed as suspects
 - This shows that though they tried to frame CJ, it didn't entirely work!
- OG Loc is now a rap star, managed by Big Smoke, and interviewed by Lazlow
- The marijuana on The Truth's farm being burned down is discussed
- Tenpenny and Pulaski aren't present at the courthouse when their court case is mentioned
 - Pulaski's murder is never mentioned
- After the player beats the final mission, Lianne Forget mentions that Tenpenny's body was found and mutilated
- Richard Burns' news segments give an insight of the various locations in the narrative
 - For example, he interviews the former child star at The Four Dragons Casino
 - He experiences a carjacking first-hand
 - He discusses the riots that occur toward the end of the story
- Madd Dogg's drunken suicide attempt is discussed
- Madd Dogg's career revival is mentioned
- Madd Dogg's mysterious new manager is mentioned
- Madd Dogg is interviewed later and mentions his new manager, Carl Johnson!
- OG Loc is interviewed by Lazlow after he makes it big
 - Big Smoke promotes OG Loc during this segment
- Big Smoke mentions his new orphanage
- B Dup is interviewed and discusses that there aren't *enough* drugs being sold

The news broadcasts update the player as you've progressed through the story. It's a nice reminder of what you've achieved so far. It also reminds you of the setting of San Andreas, particularly, Los Santos. CJ could be driving through the desert, but on WCTR, he'll be reminded that B Dup shows no remorse about being a dope pusher. The occasional interludes from Big Smoke remind CJ that the traitor is still out there and is more prominent than ever.

This has become a staple for many open-world games not just the GTA franchise games. There have also been films that have used radio to carry the story further – such as in the film *My Blue Heaven* when Barney Coopersmith hears about Wally getting thrown out of the baseball team – and then in the next scene, he sees that his wife is leaving him for Wally! Of course, let's not forget Samuel L. Jackson's role as the disc jockey Mister Señor Love Daddy adding to the narrative in ***Do The Right Thing*** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097216/>).

Without a doubt, *GTA: San Andreas*' radio stations have mastered the art of using background audio to further the narrative. As other audio formats, such as podcasts, are becoming a larger part of our lives, think about how you can use them in the background to influence your stories.

“You bein’ funny?” “I’m tryin’ to be!”

How to Write Humor

The GTA franchise has its serious moments and its dark moments, and *GTA: San Andreas* is no different. But what has made this game stand out and become the subject of countless memes, is the brilliant humor. If you’re interested in learning how to write humor, there are so many lessons from this game.

While the game satirizes America, let’s first focus on the British humour that you’ll find throughout:

- Double-entendres using British slang
 - Juank Air
 - Sprunk
 - Wang Cars
 - Vank Hoff Hotel
 - Helena Wankstein
 - Vans with the company name: Harry Plums
 - Cluckin’ Bell – rhyming slang for ‘Fuckin’ Hell’ – possibly **inspired by Blackadder** (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0383385/trivia/?item=tr2292377&ref_ext_shr_lnk)
- The banter between Kent Paul and Maccor
- The character **James Pedeaston** ([https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/James_Pedeaston_\(3D_Universe\)](https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/James_Pedeaston_(3D_Universe))) from WCTR whose sick proclivities are expressed subtly through his posh English accent

Now let’s look at some other satirical elements that have made this a timeless game. While the story is in the early 1990s, much of the satire remains relevant today. One of the best features of the political satire in the game is that it can piss off both the left and the right.

A lot of the best political humor has always done this. In today’s polarized America, we see a lot of humor catering to an audience of a particular persuasion. But the best comedians have always mocked the absurdities of both the liberal and conservative worldview. It’s a game that’s able to poke fun at different types of people – without holding back.

Here are some examples:

- The character Freddy is flamboyantly homosexual, and his dialogue and his proclivities are the source of humor – this will offend a sensitive liberal

- Conservative hysteria around homosexuality is also mocked – such as when Lianne Forget on WCTR states, **“BREAKING NEWS: Is Skateboarding Turning Your Son Gay?”** (<https://youtu.be/thsJdJRTghA?t=511>)
- Dr. Peyton Phillips and Dr. Mary Phillips are a hilarious couple who express their political views. Since they’re at opposite ends, they bicker with each other and can shock the audience and the callers with their views. One of the major reasons why the humor is funny **is due to exaggeration**
 - Political caricature is a brilliant technique when writing jokes. It’s hilarious to hear Peyton express his dreams of living in a commune. In contrast, it’s also funny for Mary to talk about how great Los Santos is despite the crime and how people would give their “right arm and left leg” to live there!
 - This is a reflection of how the political landscape is in the USA today. Many dream of turning the country into a “socialist paradise” while ignoring the horrors of this system; others will remind them that despite crime, shootings, and rising poverty, the country is the best, and everywhere else sucks!

One final factor that’s made *GTA: San Andreas* one of the funniest storylines in the franchise is the dialogue. There are quotable lines that lead to huge laughs even 20 years later.

There are too many hilarious lines of dialogue to discuss. I’ll pick a few favorites to analyze why they work:

- **“You picked the wrong house, fool!”**
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzJDE7BaXyY>)
 - This is an excellent way to introduce a character. The humor might come from Clifton Powell’s distinctive voice, but clearly, it’s intended to play for laughs. Using a word like ‘fool’ rather than a stronger expletive makes it funny rather than frightening
- **“Tony’s buried over there, Little Devil over there, and Big Devil over there…”**
(<https://youtu.be/OpTizzox2Qo?t=514>)
 - This is funny because of the choice of names. It’s a serious conversation as Sweet is telling CJ about their murdered homies. But hearing a name like “Little Devil” gets a laugh and then the “Big” version adds an extra laugh
- **OG Loc’s funny moments** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTFloLssM6k>)
 - There are many reasons why OG Loc’s dialogue is hilarious: 1) It’s poetic – comparing himself to Moses at one point! 2) He lacks self-awareness: until Bogman tells him his rhymes suck, he doesn’t seem to be aware of it 3) His overcompensation for his lack of toughness: saying that he keeps it real after CJ mocks him for his relationship with Freddy – or constantly saying he’s “gangsta” and even his threats to Lazlow
- **The Truth’s dialogue** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rt00FL4tPU4>)

- What The Truth says will make you think, but also laugh because 1) He's paranoid about the government – such as when he calls CJ and then says “Prank caller! Prank caller!” 2) His informing other's about conspiracies, such as discussing how many religious relics are in the Pentagon 3) His chilled out attitude even in stressful situations 4) His poetic way of not getting to the point – saying the green goo is ‘Year Zero’ without actually saying what the goo is for!
- **Zero's dialogue (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Dtpia-apns>)**
 - One of the reasons that Zero's dialogue is hilarious is because it contrasts sharply with how CJ would speak. But it's also funny because he doesn't give a straight response. He goes on a tangent to discuss a potential “war” with Berkley. The fact that he feels his relationship with Berkley is a war (though in Supply Lines, it is!) creates hilarious dialogue. He also uses high vocabulary words that add to the nerdy humor – referring to a barrel as an “obstruction” and asking CJ to “come hither!”

The list can go on about the funny dialogue and if I mentioned it all, this guide would be much longer. Here are a few tips on writing funny dialogue that one can learn from the game:

- Vary the style of speaking – accommodate different demographics, cultural backgrounds, life experiences, social classes, etc.
- Use poetic words – the dialogue doesn't always have to be ‘realistic’ – it can be grand – such as when Tenpenny tells CJ: **“We can shit on you from such a height, you'll think God Himself has crapped on you...”** (<https://youtu.be/EGQ-xQ5SZK0?t=38>)
- You can use jargon, such as when Zero explains his devices
- Being loquacious can be funny – such as when Zero drags on
- Being economical with words can also be funny – like when Toreno wants to see what CJ is made of – and CJ responds with **“What do it look like I'm made of? Puddin'?”** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Sp9UWV2cVs>)
- Being mean can also be funny, like the coldness of Dr. Mary Phillips when she lacks empathy for some of the callers
- Conversely, fake empathy also works – such as **Mike Andrews** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjY4oK11l-s>) who masquerades as a motivational speaker, but really just wants to keep the poor in their place
- Sarcasm and dry humor work well – like the **responses from Cluckin' Bell employees** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Lf_o3pTvuw)
- Dark humor that exposes cruelty, stupidity, and the realities of life – like **Cluckin' Bell commercials!** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgnUSHbkfyk>)

Finally, let's have a quick look at some of the great visual elements that have added to the game's humor. Again, there's too many to mention, so here are a few examples:

- CJ waving his hand in front of Woozie's face – to check if he's really blind
- Woozie running into walls because he doesn't know his way around and then blaming something else – “getting a feel of the place” or “the devious bastards have changed the layout!”
- OG Loc's dancing adds to the humor of his raps
- Madd Dogg accosting OG Loc while CJ is talking to Jimmy Silverman
- The motorcycle cops throwing down a donut as they have to chase down the gang
- Catalina holding a knife to a man's throat – and this is how she gets introduced in the story!
- The absurd costumes of Cluckin' Bell and Burger Shot employees – it adds humor to an otherwise mundane task of buying food
- The Truth often in meditative position – showing that he's always in control, and can't get interrupted by whatever tension is happening in close proximity; it's also a humorous contrast to the other characters who often seem stressed and overwhelmed by their situation
- The absurdity of Benny walking around shirtless with a large dildo in his hand as he attempts to meet Millie
- **Explosions and fails (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lz4rsCTlDCc>)** are also some of the funniest things that can occur in the game

When writing your own stories, think about the visual elements that can add a tinge of humor. After CJ learns that Woozie is blind, it adds to the humor when he tries to see if its true.

A serious conversation between CJ and Jimmy Silverman becomes funny when you see Madd Dogg and OG Loc in the background. Pay close attention to the cutscenes to observe background characters and how they add humor to the atmosphere.

There's so much humor in the game that it's hard to mention it all. When trying to create humor for your stories, focus on wordplay, dialogue, visual comedy, satire, and parody to get the laughs.

“They’re from my rhyme book!”

How to Pay Homage

While some artists have been criticized for being heavily influenced by other artists, this adds a richness to their work. Imitation is the best form of flattery, and one of the reasons the GTA series holds up is because of its references to other works of art.

With *GTA: San Andreas*, there are also references to real-life incidents which makes the game more immersive – and which hits home more. It’s a great lesson on how to take multiple influences and weave them into your own story.

Cinematic Influences

Cinema has always influenced the plots and themes of the GTA series. The main inspiration for *GTA: San Andreas* comes from “Hood” movies, which were released around the same era as the game’s story.

CJ returns home after learning of his mother’s murder. A drive-by shooting, intending to kill Sweet, accidentally killed Ms. Johnson instead. The shooters were driving a Green Sabre. The Green Sabre is briefly mentioned in the “**Drive-Thru**” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1aTlYlfzRk>) mission by Ryder, before Big Smoke interrupts and changes the subject. If playing for the first time, it’s easy to miss this line. When CJ learns of Big Smoke and Ryder’s betrayal, he sees the parked Green Sabre.

The Green Sabre is very much like the green 1968 Pontiac Executive seen during the **final scene** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36VtH0J5Bbw>) of *Menace II Society* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107554>). In both the film and the game, these are the vehicles used to conduct a drive-by shooting. Of course, *Menace II Society*, as well as *Boyz n The Hood* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101507>), both deal with gang rivalries – one of the major themes in *GTA: San Andreas*.

Martin Scorsese’s influence on the franchise can be seen all the way back to *GTA III*. In this story, his film *Casino* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112641>) has an influence on the theme of the Las Venturas missions – as CJ wants to help Woozie dominate the city. When CJ is digging a grave for Officer Hernandez, he’s instructed to dig a grave big enough for two people – as he’s also going in! This could reference the grave dug for Nicky and his brother toward the **end of the film.*** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afaoj2LQqd4>)

[**Very violent scene!*]

Interestingly enough, the film features Frank Vincent and James Woods. Both of them voice characters in *GTA: San Andreas*—Salvatore Leone and Mike Toreno, respectively.

Many other references to cinema exist in the game:

- The mission “High Noon” no doubt gets its from the **classic Western film** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044706>)
- The film “**Con Air**” (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118880>) has a segment where the villain escapes in a firetruck, just as Tenpenny does. This same film has a scene where cops drop their donuts before a chase – which happens in the **final segment of the “Reuniting the Families” mission** (<https://youtu.be/q5gz81wYoHI?t=415>)
- Perhaps the “Gimp” outfit that CJ wears when he meets Millie could be inspired by **Pulp Fiction** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110912>) – though the circumstances are different, and thankfully not violent!
 - The “Gimp” scene from the film involves Butch using a Katana to rescue Marcellus Wallace. This *might* have carried over to the game where CJ kills the **Snakehead with a Katana** (<https://youtu.be/gteqfENnsH4?t=553>) to rescue the refugees
- And, of course, the chase sequence from the Russian gangsters is **inspired by Terminator 2** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnBpzZ3H8pk>)
- Ken Rosenberg was inspired by Sean Penn’s character Dave Kleinfeld from **Carlito’s Way** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106519/>). The hairstyle from the film is shown more in *GTA: Vice City* – whereas his cocaine addiction is the inspiration for Rosenberg’s sniffles in *GTA: San Andreas*
- Officer Pulaski seems to have a lot of inspiration from another character played by his voice actor Chris Penn – “Nice Guy” Eddie from **Reservoir Dogs** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105236>). Apart from having the same first name, both Pulaski and “Nice Guy” Eddie are subordinate to the main villain – Tenpenny and Joe, respectively. Both characters seem to be insecure and are also aggressive in their language
- Sean Penn also acted in the film **Colors** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094894>), which deals with two police officers managing gangs across Los Angeles. This is exactly what Tenpenny and Pulaski do. Plus, Ice-T, who plays Madd Dogg, rapped the theme song for this film! The film also depicts two police officers (played by Robert Duvall and Sean Penn) who are members of C.R.A.S.H.
- It’s also believed that Tenpenny’s character is heavily inspired by Alonzo Harris, the corrupt police officer from **Training Day** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0139654>). This character was inspired by disgraced police officer Rafael Pérez, which we’ll delve into later

These are just a few examples of how cinema has influenced the game’s story and gameplay. So, what’s the lesson for writers? How do you take bits and pieces from your favorite media, while still creating an original story?

The key with *GTA: San Andreas* is that it doesn’t take plots from several films to make one cohesive story. The characters are original but can find themselves in a similar

world to the aforementioned films. That's why a fan of *Menace II Society* can see a character like Caine when they look at CJ. The protagonists of both the film and the video game have dark backgrounds and aren't completely innocent – yet can win the sympathy of the player/audience.

Characters from the game are sometimes modeled after existing film characters. Scenarios such as the truck chase and aesthetics such as the Green Sabre are taken from cinema. But the story is truly unique – and it's this combination of an original story with pop culture references that makes the game so endearing even today.

Real-Life Inspiration

The game has been inspired by real-life incidents, which is why it not only entertains but also hits close to home for many players.

Tenpenny and Pulaski are part of an organization called C.R.A.S.H. (pronounced “Crash”), through which they take advantage of the various gangs. The film *Colors* featured two police officers in an organization with the same name. The organization is based on an **actual unit (<https://www.talesfromtheunderworld.com/p/crash-a-look-at-the-controversial>)** within the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD).

This unit's responsibility was to tackle gang violence within Los Angeles. It was later found out that some of the unit members were involved in illegal activities. This became known as the **Rampart scandal (<https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/w66345622>)**. Some officers were accused of a variety of crimes, including perjury, bank robbery, unprovoked police brutality, unprovoked shooting, planting false evidence, and dealing narcotics.

One of the police officers involved was Rafael Pérez, who was accused of being involved in several crimes. One of them was the shooting of Javier Ovando, a Honduran immigrant who was part of the 18th Street Gang. Officer Pérez was accused of being involved in the unprovoked shooting of Ovando, which paralyzed him. Ovando was later framed as having fired at the police first.

Ovando was sentenced to 23 years in prison for his alleged crime. After Officer Pérez recanted his testimony, he was released. He would then receive the largest settlement in the history of Los Angeles for being a victim of police misconduct.

One might conclude that Tenpenny is based on Pérez and the fatal shooting of Officer Pendelbury and subsequently framing CJ is based on this incident.

The other major incident referenced in the game is the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, which might be why the story takes place in the same year.

The events that led up to the Los Angeles riots dealt with many members of the African-American community feeling that there was increased police hostility toward their community. The two events that caused the pressure cooker to burst were the killing of **Latasha Harlins** (<https://allthatsinteresting.com/latasha-harlins>) and the beating of **Rodney King** (<https://www.biography.com/crime/rodney-king>).

The riots lasted six days, and their effects still haunt the nation over three decades later. The amount of violence and property damage cost shook Los Angeles to the core. These horrific events inspired the riots which we see in *GTA: San Andreas* as one gets closer to completing the main missions.

The reasons behind the riots in the game are different – but any player knows how tense it is to drive around Los Santos and see cars blow up, witness some pedestrians run with TVs, and dodge bullets from other pedestrians!

In reality, the riots came from anger toward the judicial system. In the game, they came from anger toward Tenpenny and Pulaski's having the charges against them dropped.

This was a bold move from the writers, and it added a sense of realism to the story. This event was a defining moment for life in Los Angeles in the early 1990s. By having a riot scenario in the game until Tenpenny dies, the player is reminded why this game is a period piece. The game is entertaining and fun to play. It's got a lot of humor, but this scenario confronts us with the ugliness of violence – and the backlash toward a corrupt system.

Here are some of the other real-life events that inspired the game's story:

- The feud between OG Loc and Madd Dogg is inspired by a similar feud between **Vanilla Ice and Suge Knight** (<https://malonepost.com/posts/how-vanilla-ice-unintentionally-changed-the-future-of-hip-hop>)
- OG Loc is partially based on rapper Ja Rule, who also shares the same first name: Jeffrey
- The tensions between the Grove Street Families and the Ballas are likely inspired by the feud between the Bloods and Crips
- The Latin gangs in the game are inspired by gangs from Los Angeles
- The crack epidemic that plagued Los Angeles is depicted at various parts throughout the game
 - Seeing the theft of “mom’s blender” and TVs throughout the riot sequences mirrors the reality of similar thefts that occurred during the crack epidemic

If you've had even the slightest inkling of such events, they add to your immersion of the story. The story of *GTA: San Andreas* hasn't just lasted long due to it being entertaining – but because a lot of it hits close to home – and makes us reflect on a dark period in American history.

“Ese, I gotta see you holmes, tell you something.”

How to Write a Twist

After taking over a lot of territory, CJ has made his presence known once again in Los Santos. He, along with Sweet and other Grove Street members, are ready to take on the Ballas and get all their territory back.

Sweet is also impressed with CJ and apologizes for having doubted him. He tells CJ to get some ammo and then to meet him for a gang shootout against the Ballas.

Within a minute and ten seconds, we witness the highest point in CJ’s story in this short opening scene. At the story’s beginning, CJ gets pushed around by Tenpenny and Pulaski. He feels guilty and almost unwelcome when he arrives in Grove Street. The hostility that Sweet has for CJ is seen immediately. Ryder constantly mocked him, to the point where he could have changed his name to “Busta!”

But now, we’ve seen an incredible change in his character arc. He’s gone from being a liability to being a force to be reckoned with. **This is the perfect opportunity to introduce a twist. The climber has almost reached the summit – now’s the time for the avalanche to come crashing down.**

Upon leaving the house, CJ gets a call from Cesar, who insists that they meet immediately. He can’t tell CJ what the matter is over the phone, so a reluctant CJ says he’ll meet Cesar, but it must be quick.

As CJ and Cesar sit in a car under the freeway, they watch the Ballas step out of a garage. And then, all of a sudden Ryder comes out of the garage.

CJ’s response is a simple, “What the fuck?”

This is a perfect beginning to the twist. It’s a quick dialogue from CJ. It isn’t a long exposition where he begins discussing why Ryder is hanging out with Ballas suddenly. The three words are enough, and the player can decide what thoughts are running through CJ’s mind.

When Big Smoke steps out of the garage, CJ is shocked again and has a short response – this time even more confused: “Oh, no! Shit, Smoke what you into?”

And then, the Green Sabre is revealed. And then CJ realizes that this was the same car used for the drive-by shooting that killed his mother.

This brilliant twist shows Smoke and Ryder's betrayal. Earlier in the story, there are some questions one can raise about Big Smoke. These include why he lives in Ballas territory (allegedly his "aunt's house"), why he didn't shoot at the Ballas, and why Tenpenny and Pulaski kept visiting him.

CJ does question Smoke at one point, but he just responds with another riddle, and CJ doesn't pay much attention. The Green Sabre is mentioned briefly when CJ wants to learn about his mother's killing, and Big Smoke changes the subject. However, these incidents are quick and don't drag out too long. A first-time player might easily not notice these signs of Big Smoke's treachery.

This is smart writing that leads up to the twist. There are just a few hints here and there that make one question Big Smoke. When we finally see the reveal, there's not a lot of dialogue. The imagery shows most of it. We don't hear the conversation between Big Smoke and Tenpenny, but we don't have to. This is an excellent example of writing for a visual medium as discussed earlier.

CJ meets up with Sweet who's been severely injured. Once again, he just briefly mentions that Big Smoke and Ryder have betrayed them – before taking on the Ballas. After the shootout, the police come to arrest CJ and Sweet. The discussion, once again is brief, there's no need for a long explanation.

The mission ends with CJ waking up in the police car, realizing that Tenpenny and Pulaski have taken him to the countryside. They tell him that there's no such thing as loyalty and that Big Smoke does what he's told to do. They remind CJ that he's still under their thumb and that more tasks are en route.

We now know that it's going to be a while until we get back to Grove Street. It'll be some time until CJ comes into contact with Big Smoke to confront him. This mystery and anticipation linger until we get to the final act of the story.

This is how you write a twist!

“And I’d do it all again!”

How to End a Story

The final act of the story begins when Toreno meets CJ at Madd Dogg’s recording studio – informing him that he has one last job. CJ is fed up with Toreno and even points a gun at him. Toreno laughs and tells him to pick up his cell phone. It’s Sweet – he’s been released early from prison, not knowing what happened.

CJ tells Sweet that he’ll pick him up. When he asks Toreno what’s the job, Toreno simply responds, “I just want you to go pick up your brother. Get out of here.”

CJ just stares back at him for a few seconds before leaving. He doesn’t say anything, and his expression is rather stoic. But you can tell that this is when he realizes that Toreno, despite his often aggressive and pushy demeanor, is a man of his word. This is when the audience realizes that Toreno is one of the best characters in the story. He’s dark, manipulative, and mysterious. But he believes in the honor of keeping his word.

This is the perfect way to start the final act of the story. “Honor” and “Loyalty” are two concepts that we’ll continue to see until we reach the end of the line.

CJ picks up Sweet outside the police station in Los Santos. This is the moment that CJ has been waiting for ever since he woke up in the countryside following the shootout against the Ballas and learning of the betrayal.

While a lot of great scenes in this story focus more on the visuals, this scene makes use of dialogue to set up the final act. After Sweet gets out of prison, CJ updates him on everything he’s been doing in San Fierro and Las Venturas while he’s been locked up.

“I’m alright, man. Hey, man - we off to a new spot! We got a mansion, Sweet! We been putting in work, and shit is going well. We got a stake in the casino, we got some insane shit in Fierro, we’re getting into the rap game! Hey man, let me get you some new clothes, c'mon!”

Sweet is furious and couldn’t care less to hear what CJ’s been up to. Since the beginning, we’ve seen that Sweet has a one-track mind. His only concern is Grove Street, and he’s disappointed that CJ seems to have forgotten about the ‘hood.

Sweet: “You never did get it, did you, Carl? I need to go check on things in the ‘hood. Man, that’s the problem: you always a perpetrator, running from what’s real!”

CJ: “Hey, man, shit’s fucked up there. You don’t wanna be in the ‘hood.”

Sweet: “No, that’s exactly where I wanna be. What you done for our ‘hood?”

CJ: “Man, what the hood done for me? Always dragging me down. Ever since I got out the hood, shit been cracking! That’s everybody’s dream, to get out of the ‘hood...”

Sweet: “Man, you sound just like Smoke right now.”

CJ (a short pause): “Alright, man, you hard. I’m gonna show you what’s going on in the ‘hood...”

Upon returning to Grove Street, they both see how it’s in an even worse condition than when CJ returned. But now, it’s not just violence among the various gangs. The crack epidemic has erupted in Los Santos – and this mirrors the **real-life situation in the country** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Fe__Ae0ahl).

They see a man running around holding a blender – offering to sell it to them, hoping to use the money to purchase crack. Sweet realizes it’s their mother’s blender as the man runs off. This represents the sad situation of the crack epidemic – ordinary Americans would turn to petty theft just to finance their addiction. The mission requires CJ to take out the drug dealers who are plaguing Grove Street.

This opening to the final act of the story comes full circle. Grove Street is in a mess when CJ returns after five years on the east coast. Now, he’s spent so much time in other parts of San Andreas enjoying the high life – after moving up in life. Yet, he returns to Grove Street and sees that it continues to decline.

Perhaps this is why Sweet is furious. It’s a reminder that when the Grove Street Families aren’t in charge, misery spreads. This is also a reminder of Big Smoke’s influence and how his drug empire hasn’t crumbled – despite CJ’s efforts, including **blowing up one of the crack factories** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKW3ZIEr64s>).

CJ takes out a few drug dealers and Ballas. But the war has just begun.

CJ realizes that while he has been living a great life, he’s neglected the ‘hood. He’s realizing why Sweet is so concerned with what’s going on in Grove Street. They can enjoy living in Madd Dogg’s mansion – but they can’t sleep peacefully if crack dealers are roaming freely in front of their home on Grove Street. The tension builds, and we now see CJ at his best – taking territory away from the Ballas.

It’s impressive to see what CJ can do throughout the story – whether it’s stealing a jetpack, a military jet, or robbing a casino. Ultimately, he shows his might when he and Sweet roll up to Ballas territory and claim it as theirs.

After CJ takes over territory for Grove Street, the writers cleverly decide to return to two characters we saw at the beginning of the story: B Dup and Big Bear. We see these two

characters for just under two minutes throughout the story. Yet, these extremely minor characters make such an impact on the story, and we see it in the final act.

CJ meets B Dup and Big Bear in the first act. He sees that Big Bear has become a shadow of his former self. It's implied that Big Bear was a tough gangbanger until he got addicted to crack, thanks to B Dup, who supplies it to him. Initially, we see that CJ can't stand up to B Dup beyond a point. We see that B Dup *owns* Big Bear – insisting that he be called “Sir” and telling him to “make that motherfuckin' toilet sparkle!”

While the relationship between these two characters isn't necessarily part of the plot, it's part of the setting. It's an important backdrop to help immerse the player/audience into the world of the 'hood. The relationship between these two characters adds to the mood of the story. It reminds us that though there's a lot of humor and hilarity throughout the story, misery lurks in the shadowy corners of each street in the ghetto.

When CJ and Sweet take over the Ballas territory in Glen Park, they decide to show up at B Dup's house. This time, they're going to confront him. Sweet grabs B Dup, and CJ, more assertive than he was before, suggests that they should “pop this motherfucker...”

B Dup calls on Big Bear to take out CJ and Sweet. Big Bear shows up, and there's a tense moment – as CJ wonders whether his friend will attack him. B Dup gets impatient and urges Big Bear to shoot CJ and Sweet. Then, Big Bear loses his temper and tells B Dup that he's tired of being his slave. He punches B Dup and knocks him to the ground.

He then asks CJ to help him out and that he wants to get back to being part of the Grove Street Families. The mission ends with Sweet driving Big Bear away – presumably to a rehabilitation center.

This is another short scene that speaks volumes. When CJ first comes across B Dup at the beginning of the story, his intention is to recruit him to help fight the Ballas. But B Dup has other intentions and tells CJ and Ryder this:

“The only thing that matters is the 'hood, homie. But you'll never understand what gettin' this money is like. You know what, man? Get the fuck outta here before you be layin' on your back. Big Bear, come check this fool.”

B Dup says that the only thing that matters to him is the hood. But unlike Sweet, all he cares about is making money from the people who live there. He couldn't care less about fighting the Ballas because he wants to take advantage of the drugs they've introduced – so he can profit off it. When CJ and Sweet confront him, he's working for Big Smoke, which shows how much of an influence he's become since betraying CJ and Sweet.

But when Big Bear musters up the courage and knocks B Dup out, we see a change. We see that while there's a drug epidemic plaguing the 'hood, it's not here to stay. This short scene

is a powerful anti-drug message that the writers have put in. The beginning of the story shows a sense of hopelessness in Grove Street.

While matters may have become even worse now, there's a silver lining – and that's exemplified when Big Bear frees himself from the shackles that B Dup has put on him.

The two scenes featuring these minor characters are one of the best parts of the entire narrative. It shows that you don't need to show or say much to get an important message across.

CJ and Sweet continue to take back as much territory from the Ballas as possible. However, in the middle of this, CJ makes a quick trip to Vinewood to check on Madd Dogg. At the recording studio, Madd Dogg is watching a music video – of none other than OG Loc!

This is another great decision by the writers. The last time we saw OG Loc was at a house party when he was reminding us that he was the “man in the place, a gun in my waist, punch you in the face...it's Loc baby!”

Now, he's switched his rhymes thanks to possessing Madd Dogg's rhyme book. He's become a star, and his debut album was released by the famous Blastin' Fools Records. His music success also has another dark side: it's a front for Big Smoke's drug business and he likely launders his money through OG Loc's career. He's also become OG Loc's manager.

So now, CJ, who's Madd Dogg's manager, decides he needs to atone for his sins. Madd Dogg realizes that OG Loc is the one who stole the rhyme book. He's made a name for himself due to Madd Dogg's talent. CJ suggests confronting OG Loc to get back the rhyme book.

This is a great way to tie up the loose ends in Madd Dogg's feud with OG Loc. Furthermore, it adds a lot of humor to an otherwise serious and tense final act.

The journey to ambush OG Loc includes up a profound conversation between CJ and Madd Dogg. Madd Dogg is perplexed as to how someone like OG Loc, who isn't tough at all, can succeed in the music business.

CJ discusses how the music business has changed and that record labels seem to care more about showmanship, dancing, and making a quick buck. Nevertheless, he believes that Madd Dogg will always succeed because he's genuine. This could be a reference to the contrast with the hip-hop scene in the 1990s. Gangsta rap was all the rage, including artists such as Ice-T, who voiced Madd Dogg.

At the same time, the music industry, eager to rake in piles of cash, was eager to give anyone a record deal to turn a profit. Authenticity didn't matter too much – all that

mattered was if an artist could reach mainstream success to help the record label succeed.

Many players have even commented that CJ's and Madd Dogg's conversation about the music industry is even more relevant today. This is the power of good writing—it doesn't age poorly; rather, it becomes even more profound as time passes.

After confronting OG Loc at the Blastin' Fools Records office, it's clear that the game is up. OG Loc is scared of both Madd Dogg and CJ, and no one, not even Big Smoke can protect him. Jimmy Silverman, a producer at the record label, comes out and even he says that OG Loc is a phony and he needs an artist who can bring him hits. CJ introduces himself as Madd Dogg's manager, and it's implied that Madd Dogg will now sign onto the record label.

This is the perfect interlude before the story goes any further. It wraps things up with OG Loc but also shows us that while CJ is back to clean the 'hood, he's still determined to move up in life. It's also great for his character arc – he's realized he was wrong for helping OG Loc and destroying Madd Dogg's career. Now, he wants to help the rapper become even bigger than he was.

Some time passes, and CJ checks in on Sweet at Grove Street. Sweet is with a few of their fellow gang members and is discussing the need to take back territory – and re-assert their authority.

When he meets Sweet, however, CJ still wants to take it easy with fighting the Ballas. He tells Sweet that the world is bigger than the 'hood and that he has other obligations, such as being Madd Dogg's manager. Sweet then reminds CJ that they can't look after Grove Street while sitting in a "bitch-ass rapper's mansion." Sweet tells CJ that they were born in the 'hood and that they'll probably die there. He asserts that it's their duty to take over territory.

This once again shows the contrasting views between CJ and Sweet. CJ wants to move up in the world, but Sweet believes they'll always have a duty toward Grove Street. He feels he has to keep reminding CJ to follow through with his duties, accusing him of "leaving jobs half-finished" and even saying that CJ has become "uppity."

They decide to take over a few more territories – knowing this is the only way to ensure their dominance and eventually get to Big Smoke. CJ, however, has not forgotten about his other obligations outside of Grove Street.

The gang is chilling at Madd Dogg's mansion. Maccer and The Truth have also joined them. They're all watching a news report discussing Tenpenny and Pulaski's court case.

This is a rather minimalistic cutscene but one of the most well-written cutscenes in the entire narrative. It does a great job of maximizing dialogue, visuals, and audio. We don't see the TV report—rather, we just hear the audio of the news reporters.

Through the audio, we learn that Tenpenny and Pulaski are being tried in absentia for a variety of alleged crimes, including the murder of Officer Pendelbury. We see the characters watching the TV intently, each expressing their frustrations – both Sweet and Cesar wondering how many years the cops will get in prison. The Truth expresses his rage that he had to lose his farm thanks to Tenpenny. And lest we forget, Maccer, as usual, expressed his frustration at having to “hold it in.”

The cutscene fades for a second to imply that time has passed. This quick and simple transition is a fantastic writing tool to suggest the passage of time. Then, we hear on the news that the court case has ended...because the charges have been dropped!

They all become angry, and then Sweet stands up, asserting that no one will riot in his 'hood – meaning that he won't allow it. But Cesar points out that it's too late – the riots have already begun.

CJ and Sweet leave the mansion and drive back to Grove Street. On the way, they witness the riots. Cars are catching on fire, pedestrians are shooting each other, cops aren't able to protect anyone, looting has become the norm, and terror plagues every corner – ensuring that no one feels safe.

This is an incredible way to begin the end of the story. We now see what happens when people have had enough of a corrupt system, and CJ now sees what happens when the Grove Street Families don't hold the power in the hood.

The war against Tenpenny has just begun.

This is a simple mission that only requires the player to drive CJ and Sweet from Madd Dogg's mansion to Grove Street. Yet there are many highlights in this mission that a writer should pay attention to:

- CJ bows his head when Officer Hernandez and Pulaski's disappearance is mentioned
 - He could be burying his head because he knows that he killed Pulaski and wonders if he'll ever be caught, or
 - He could be burying his head because he knows that Hernandez is dead and he's showing his respect. He was **rude to Hernandez** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ogh3UuHBa0g>) at the beginning of the story – even calling him a 'bitch.' Yet now he remembers that Hernandez saved him from getting killed by Pulaski. CJ might be showing respect to Hernandez by lowering his head

- The harsh reality of corruption is explained – though not unnecessarily expanded upon
 - Cesar tells Sweet that the officers will probably get a maximum of five years in prison, rather than twenty as Sweet suggested, because “cops always get off easy”
 - After the charges are dropped, The Truth states, “You see, you can’t trust the system, man”
- There’s always a bit of humor to ease the tension – it comes before we see the worst part of the segment, which is the riot itself
 - Maccer having the urge to...you know what
 - After the charges are dropped, Maccer says that he’s been arrested several times for “natural behavior”
 - Sweet asking CJ what’s up with Maccer. And then goes on to say that Maccer seems to want to consult with “Prof. Hans Jerkov, spank the monkey, take Palm-ela out, and burp the worm!” This hilarious exchange comes right after Sweet and CJ express their frustration with Tenpenny, and Sweet states that they must take the corrupt cop themselves. This is another clever move from the writers. It makes the player/audience anticipate that an attack on Tenpenny is imminent, but the immediate change to a humorous discussion means that we’ll have to wait and see what’ll happen
- As CJ and Sweet get closer to Grove Street, they begin to witness the riot. They blame it all on Tenpenny, further showcasing their anger toward him

This is an excellent setup for the final showdown when CJ confronts Big Smoke and then Tenpenny. But before they do, CJ has to thank Cesar for all that he’s done for him.

This brings the player/audience to the **“Los Desperados”** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNeQHokQuE8>) mission. Sweet is determined to put an end to these riots and finally take down Big Smoke and Tenpenny.

CJ and Sweet are once again arguing. CJ tells Sweet that he’s done a lot for the ‘hood whereas Sweet quickly snaps at him. Sweet feels that CJ has only done things for himself. He reminds CJ that he left the family to live in Liberty City. He reminds CJ that he went out and committed crimes to help his family – even going as far as robbing people to pay for their mother’s operation.

This cutscene often irks players. Sweet never seems to appreciate CJ – especially since CJ did so much to help him get released from prison. Sweet himself felt he’d serve [life in prison](#), yet CJ was determined to get him released.

This is where a lot of criticism toward Sweet’s character comes from. He seems to never change his mind or his attitude toward CJ – except for a few moments here and there. As discussed earlier, this might make it seem that he’s a poorly-written character. Moreover, because CJ is our protagonist, we feel a greater attachment toward him than we do Sweet.

However, this cutscene might challenge how we think of CJ. Certainly, he's done a lot for his entire family since returning to Los Santos. He's made major strides on Grove Street and he's built more avenues of wealth that'll help his family.

However, it's true that he left his family when they needed him the most. He left when Brian died, and it's implied that he "let Brian die." He didn't see his family for five years while he was in Liberty City. He didn't look after Kendl during that time, and he wasn't there when their mother was killed. Perhaps Sweet has a point: he still has a lot of debts to pay off.

And this is what CJ attempts to do when Cesar storms in. Cesar asks CJ to help him take back his 'hood from the Vagos. CJ says he can't because he needs to help his brother. Sweet interjects and tells CJ that he wants him to pay off his debts. This is when CJ pays back Cesar for all that he has done for him. It's a bloody shootout gang war, and it's one of the most beautiful and poignant parts of the entire story.

CJ recruits some Grove Street Family members and then drives to Unity Station with them and Cesar to meet up with some Aztecas. On the way to Unity Station, they discuss the horrors surrounding them and the need to fight against the system.

As they're driving, the riots are continuing. Cars are exploding, cops are shooting, and pedestrians are looting. No matter how bright the San Andreas sun might be, it's a dark period for the 'hood.

Yet, on the way to Unity Station, we see that there's always a silver lining. Cesar wants to ask CJ a personal question. He tells CJ that he wants to "pop the question" – ask Kendl to marry him. He then asks CJ if he can talk to Sweet on his behalf, to which CJ agrees.

This is another short exchange with minimal dialogue. Yet, it tells us so much. CJ, who was once cold toward Cesar, has no problem now that he wishes to marry Kendl. He feels that Cesar doesn't need to ask for his permission – it's already been granted. Despite the horrors occurring, we see optimism. Cesar knows he's about to enter a war to take back control of his 'hood – yet he hasn't forgotten about Kendl, and the fact that he is discussing marriage shows his optimism about the future.

When they arrive at Unity Station, Cesar greets his fellow Aztecas. One of them says to CJ:

“And you must be CJ. Cesar says you're cool, so we're cool, holmes.”

Once again, the writers can say a lot with just a few words. In this one sentence from one of the Aztecas, we see how CJ's reputation has changed from the story's beginning.

Recall when CJ first met Cesar. Cesar's fellow gang member José sees CJ and looks upon him with suspicion. He even calls him a "pendejo." But now, things have changed. CJ is no

longer a “pendejo,” and he isn’t a liability as Ryder called him in the beginning. He’s now a respected member of the Grove Street Families, and he’s going to help Cesar and the Aztecas take on the Vagos.

CJ repays his debt to Cesar by taking out the Vagos. He even offers to drive an injured Aztecas member, Hazer, to the hospital. Cesar responds by saying that he’s done enough and that he’ll look after Hazer. CJ’s gesture shows how he’s grown as a person. Rather than running away from helping others – he wants to go above and beyond. He previously offered to help Big Bear and now he’s offered to help Hazer.

Before Cesar leaves for the hospital, CJ tells him that they’ll meet again when “all this is settled down.” Once again, here’s a silver lining – and a sense of optimism. CJ is confident that all will be well soon and that he and Cesar will meet again. The riots are still going on, and Big Smoke and Tenpenny are still at large. But the conclusion to this mission gives us hope that brighter days are not too far away.

Sweet tells CJ that they’ve got to take over more gang territory before they can find out where Big Smoke is hiding. Depending on how much the player enjoys the gang wars, this can be a fun interlude or a tedious chore to get to the final mission.

But how does this fit into the narrative? Would you get bored if you were reading a novel or watching a film with many scenes of repetitive gang wars?

This can be a tricky one. As far as telling a story, this gang war interlude might be exhausting for an audience. However, if it’s done cleverly and with style, then you can keep the audience engaged.

An example outside of the realm of video games would be from the French film ***Le Cercle Rouge*** (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065531>). The scene features a **jewelry heist scene** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qAfLjb-Wg8>) that’s mostly silent, save for a few sound effects. This scene is engaging and is often considered one of the highlights of the film. If your story has a segment that has something repetitive, such as several gang wars, you’ll have to focus on style to avoid boring your audience.

Once CJ takes over several territories, he’s asserted that Grove Street is here to rule. This makes the Grove Street Families more influential and powerful. Eventually, Sweet is able to find out where Big Smoke is hiding. And now, we’ve reached the end of the line.

The final mission starts with a simple cutscene of CJ and Sweet ready to head to Big Smoke’s crack fortress. There’s no long discussion about their plan. They just get up and go. This is, once again, a fantastic use of minimalist writing. A first-time player/audience has no idea what to expect. One may wonder:

- Where is the crack fortress?

- Are they planning on killing Big Smoke?
- Will Tenpenny be there?
- Will CJ and Sweet be confronted with Ballas?
- Will it just be the two of them or will other Grove Street Family members join them?

This simple opening leaves us wondering what'll happen next. This hearkens back to the opening sequence. We don't immediately learn that Beverly Johnson was murdered – we just hear that she's dead. The short conversation between CJ and Sweet is enough to bring about intrigue. Now, this new short conversation in the first cutscene of the final mission also creates suspense.

Big Smoke's crack fortress is in East Los Santos – not too far from Grove Street. It's a short drive for CJ and Sweet, but even this short distance adds to the story. Once again, the writers never waste time. Even the shortest segment will add to the story and showcase character development.

At the end of this cutscene, they leave the house with CJ saying "Johnson brothers fittin' to take that fat fool down!" This is a powerful statement – not only does it leave us excited about the impending battle we'll see, but it shows that now, CJ and Sweet aren't at odds – they're a team!

The drive there includes the brief moments of humor that ease the tension – the calm before the storm. In this case, CJ chides Sweet for buying the same "bucket ass car." As they get closer to the crack fortress, Sweet says:

"So this is it, huh? Johnson boys sorting shit out."

Sweet also asks CJ if he's nervous to which he replies in the affirmative. Sweet replies with "Me too, me too."

Look at how far the relationship between these two characters has grown. At the beginning of the story, CJ, along with Sweet, Ryder, and Big Smoke, have to cycle back to Grove Street while the Ballas are chasing after them. Sweet is frustrated with CJ's return – despite the fact that he called him back.

He asks CJ when he's leaving. CJ says that he might stay, to which Sweet responds: "Well, the last thing we need is your help."

Now, things have changed. Sweet is a lot more confident about CJ. Though he's been tough with CJ throughout the story – he now sees what his younger brother is capable of. He now knows that they'll make a great team and they'll sort shit out!

The fact that both of them said they're nervous, however, adds to the suspense. It's a brief moment of vulnerability – which we really haven't seen from Sweet. They're about to enter a

battle with their former friend – who is now a powerful drug lord. Rather than taking orders from Tenpenny and sabotaging any attempts to prove his guilt, CJ is now going to try to take him down himself. Indeed, they have a lot to be nervous about.

By now, you’ve realized that the game is full of short, memorable conversations, and this is one of them. By showing CJ and Sweet’s nervousness, we can relate to them more. We see them as the underdogs, and we want them to win even more!

When they arrive at the crack fortress, we see one of the best cutscenes ever. It’s in this scene where we see CJ’s character arc at its peak. CJ insists on going into the crack fortress and taking on Big Smoke alone. He says some of the best lines in the story in this cutscene:

CJ: “Look, I know you down for this, but I gotta go in there alone.”

Sweet: “What?”

CJ: “Smoke played me, Tenpenny played me.”

Sweet: “They played us all.”

CJ: “Yeah, but you're right - I was a buster when my family needed me the most. Hey, I let Brian die, man. This one's for him, for Moms... and for you, bro.”

Sweet: “For Grove Street, baby!”

CJ: “Yeah, for the Grove, baby.”

This is another poignant moment in the story. CJ shows his bravery. Rather than running away for five years, he will now stay and fight. He realizes that he wasn’t there when his family needed him, and now he will atone for it. He’s also admitted that he was a “busta” and he’s got to make up for that too! Sweet remains focused – that this is for Grove Street!

The final mission is a masterpiece in suspense. CJ must first steal a SWAT tank to break through the crack fortress. Then he has to go through several floors to fight against Ballas, Vagos, Rifa, and Russian mobsters to get to Big Smoke.

The variety of gangsters whom CJ has to fight through is telling. This shows that Big Smoke has truly become a powerful drug lord. Many characters in the story have a presence even when you don’t see them. Big Smoke’s on-screen presence goes away after “The Green Sabre” and we don’t see him again until “The End of the Line.”

Yet, the player/audience *feels* Big Smoke’s presence throughout the entire story. When we don’t see him, we perhaps fear him even more. He’s now a powerful drug lord and rather than hanging out with him, CJ needs to take him out.

Having to fight against these different types of gangsters shows how powerful Big Smoke's hold is. The fact that CJ has to go up three floors to get to Big Smoke just shows how inaccessible he has become. Even living directly in Ballas territory made him more accessible than now. Before CJ even reaches Big Smoke, we know that it's a different Big Smoke whom he'll confront.

Once CJ gets through the three floors, he comes across Big Smoke. This cutscene is another powerful one.

Early in the story, we see Big Smoke and Sweet playing basketball. This shows that he's part of a community. He has close homies with whom he'll shoot hoops. Now, however, we see a different picture.

After going through a large number of gangsters, CJ finds Big Smoke not surrounded by bodyguards. He's sitting by himself in a room. Instead of playing basketball with his friends, he's sitting on a sofa playing video games. He then takes a hit from his crackpipe.

The Big Smoke we see now isn't the jovial one who charged at CJ when he returned to the Johnson house. He isn't the funny friend who had a huge order at Cluckin' Bell. We see someone who might be a rich drug lord but is rather pathetic. He's on his own, he's wearing a bulletproof vest, and he's full of resentment.

CJ tells Big Smoke that he's going to take him down as well as take down Tenpenny. We then have another short but powerful exchange between CJ and Big Smoke:

CJ: "Man, you and Tenpenny..."

Big Smoke: "Fuck Tenpenny and fuck his Polish lap dog, and fuck the police, man. All that's old shit! Look at you, you got the whole world! I ain't got no regrets, man."

CJ: "Smoke, you had..."

Big Smoke: "I made it, CJ, I'm a success! I can't be touched! I don't give a fuck, fuck the whole world..."

What's powerful about this exchange is that we see that CJ is the true king. While he's still the underdog, he's still surrounded by friends who love him. Big Smoke has the money and power. Yet, he has to scream loudly to justify his position. We don't see a man who's worthy of envy. Rather, we see a man who's worthy of pity.

Even when Big Smoke picks up his shotgun, it's not a duel between him and CJ. Some other gangsters barge in, and CJ has to fight them and take out Big Smoke. CJ even mocks Big

Smoke by stating, “You wearing body armor, Smoke?” and he pathetically responds that he’s a celebrity!

Once again, we see a Big Smoke who may have more money and power but is clearly a sadder figure than when we first met him at the story's beginning.

CJ eventually takes out the gangsters and brings Big Smoke to his knees. He kneels over as Big Smoke lies with his back to the wall, breathing his final breaths. Yet, CJ isn’t celebrating. While he comes in with the intention of taking care of his fat ass, he feels a sense of sadness as he sees his former friend dying in front of him. Big Smoke says that he got caught up in the money and the power but that the world would remember his name. And then, for the final time, he says his name...and dies.

Early in the story, Big Smoke beats a Vagos member with a baseball bat and says, “Yeah, motherfucker, Big Smoke! Remember that name!” At that time, he says it with force – and we know that no one will forget his name. When he’s breathing his final breaths, he can barely say his name, and we wonder, within the context of the story, whether Big Smoke will be remembered – and if he is, will he be remembered fondly?*

****Obviously, as fans of this game, we’ll always love Big Smoke and he’s truly one of the best characters in the entire franchise. But one wonders within the story, if he’ll be remembered fondly, or if he’ll one day become a distant memory.***

Thus, the story of Big Smoke ends. This is a great way to kill off a character. But what’s great about the character is how entertaining he is. Despite the fact that he is a horrible villain, he’s one of the most liked characters in the game, because of his humor – and not to mention the excellent voice performance by Clifton Powell. Big Smoke alone shows the power of great writing. That you can create a villain and make him likable due to his dialogue and humor.

After Big Smoke dies, we now get to the final portion of the end. What we’ve seen since CJ exits Sweet’s car, is high points and low points. There’s high action when CJ breaks into the fortress and navigates and shoots his way through three floors of gangsters.

When he confronts Big Smoke, it’s a slower scene where the two men come to verbal blows. Then, they come to actual blows and have a shootout. After Big Smoke gets taken down, we have a quieter scene where CJ watches Big Smoke die and buries his head in his arm.

So now, it’s time to bring the action again. Tenpenny walks in and tells CJ that he’s ready to get out of dodge as the riots outside continue. But he’s not done with Grove Street. He will continue to train rookie cops and bend them to his will. He also now intends to kill CJ.

CJ distracts Tenpenny by pretending that Sweet is approaching. Tenpenny grabs his suitcase of cash and makes a run for it. He causes an explosion, and the crack fortress is set ablaze.

Now we get to another high point in the climax. CJ must now escape the crack fortress as it's burning down. Once again, he must fight against three floors of gangsters until he can escape. He's also got to put out fires at times just to break through doors. This is another high point with a lot of suspense.

The final segment where CJ runs out of the burning building is as cinematic as it gets. The writers made a wise choice – they know that with a final mission, a player/audience wants to see exciting and over-the-top action.

We then have nonstop action until we get to Grove Street. Tenpenny has escaped in a firetruck, and Sweet manages to jump on it and is hanging by a ladder. CJ follows the firetruck in a car. This is one of the tensest parts of the climax.

As CJ is driving, various gangsters from different gangs are throwing Molotov cocktails at him. He has to drive not only on roads but also in alleyways and on railroad tracks. He does this until a cop begins stomping on Sweet's hands. Eventually, Sweet lets go, and CJ manages to catch him in the car.

And now, the final portion of the mission begins.

Arguably, the most fun missions of *GTA: San Andreas* have nonstop action, and this one is no exception. The Johnson boys still have to chase after Tenpenny to take him down. Sweet drives, and CJ has to shoot at the cops and various gangsters who are trying to take them down and help Tenpenny escape.

This final segment is more genius writing. What better way to reach the conclusion of a crime story than having a fantastic shootout? There are a few missions in this game that require CJ to shoot at others while being driven around – and without a doubt, these are some of the most fun missions.

CJ has to shoot at cars, motorcyclists, and even a few gangsters on foot – who are still hurling Molotov cocktails at them.

As CJ is focused on fending off these gangsters, Sweet follows Tenpenny throughout the city until they reach Grove Street. Eventually, as they get to the bridge overlooking Grove Street, Tenpenny loses control. The firetruck veers off the road and falls off the bridge, crashing and overturning right on Grove Street.

Before moving on to the final cutscenes, there are a few symbolic points to notice from this entire mission:

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas
A Writing Masterclass

- The first mission requires CJ to ride a bicycle – first to Grove Street on his own and then later, back to Grove Street while escaping the Ballas
 - After CJ leaves Sweet’s car, he has to steal the SWAT tank to break into the crack fortress. A bicycle spawns in front of the car!
- Tenpenny’s first task for CJ is to burn down a house. Then later, he sets a crack house on fire, and CJ has to escape. Now, Tenpenny is escaping in a firetruck!
- As CJ and Sweet chase after Tenpenny, they pass by so many of the now-famous places familiar to the player/audience:
 - Glen Park
 - Past The Jefferson Motel
 - East Los Santos where CJ helped OG Loc kill Freddy
 - Ocean Docks, near where CJ and Ryder stole guns from the army
 - Emmet’s Place
 - The area where CJ sprays over the Ballas graffiti tags
 - The house that CJ and Ryder rob from the Vietnam War veteran
 - The Cluckin’ Bell – reminding us of Big Smoke’s order!
 - The alleyway in Rollin’ Heights where CJ is thrown out of the car at the start of the story

Note: This is something I didn’t realize on my own. Credit for this pointing out this symbolism must go to two commenters on a **gameplay video of the final mission** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5lj23EUR9U>).

Thanks!



@SargonPG3D 2 years ago

Man the symbolism in this mission is crazy.

First, when you pull up around smoke’s penthouse, there’s a bicycle. A lot of people use it to ride down. That bicycle is a reference to the beginning mission, when you had to cycle back to Ganton.

And then there’s the huge fire that Tenpenny caused. That’s a reference to the very first C.R.A.S.H. Mission, where you had to set a house ablaze. And then when the chase happens and they pass through the same alleyway that Tenpenny had dropped CJ off at in the beginning of the game.

And then one of the most recognizable, the “see you around car!” reference at the end.



@cometthemountainlion181 8 months ago

The chase also passes by the old guy’s house that you and Ryder rob in Home Invasion, the Cluckin’ Bell where Smoke makes his famous order, Emmet’s alleyway, and the area where you spray the tags in Tagging Up Turf.

After Tenpenny’s firetruck lands on Grove Street, he struggles to climb out of it – clearly in severe pain and breathing his final breaths.

After having two long segments of action, we return to a quiet cutscene – just before the final cutscene. Tenpenny has his soliloquy, in which he shows no remorse for his crimes:

“Assholes! You never understood what I did! Fifty of me, and this town would be okay! I took the trash out! I DID! And I'd do it all again...”

Tenpenny is severely injured, and he’s dying as CJ, Sweet, Cesar, and Kendl watch over him. CJ pulls out a gun, ready to kill Tenpenny and end everything once and for all. Sweet stops him and tells him that it’s not worth it. CJ wants to make sure that it’ll all be over. Sweet shows remarkable restraint, and this is one of the rare moments where he doesn’t seem enraged – he tells CJ that there’s no need to put a bullet in Tenpenny and that it’ll be reported that he died in a traffic accident.

Tenpenny dies. His body is sprawled on the street with his mouth gaping open. They look at his corpse, knowing that his tyranny has truly come to an end.

The Truth pops up and tells CJ that he’s a legend—finally able to take down the system. Sweet inquires about Smoke, and CJ says that he saw things differently. For him, it was about money and power, never about loyalty. Kendl affirms that Big Smoke was always selfish.

The Truth pops in one more bit of wisdom. That being selfish is the surest path to hell. And then, in keeping with the spirit of the writing style, a humorous moment where he says that “fifteen microdots and an ounce of mescaline” will also send you to hell!

Cesar then leads everyone back to the house by suggesting that they eat. They all start walking toward the house. CJ then towers over Tenpenny’s corpse. And then he says a now-iconic line:

“See you around...officer!”

As he says this line, he circles his fingers as if drawing a donut. Once again, this reminds of the beginning of the story. Tenpenny had the power – *he* was the towering figure. He threw CJ out and said, “See you around like a donut, Carl.”

But his reign came to an end that he deserved. Karm returns for us all, and Tenpenny brought terror throughout the ‘hood. Now, he dies alone with no one to care for him.

CJ walks away and we stare at the pathetic corpse of Tenpenny – which as we’ll learn from Lianne Forget on WCTR, will get mutilated.

The final cutscene takes place in the Johnson house. When we first see CJ in his house, he’s not at peace with himself. He’s hearing voices from his childhood and remembering

when his mother and Brian were alive, when Kendl was small, and when Sweet would try his best to take care of everyone.

Now, the atmosphere is different. However, just because Tenpenny's reign has ended, doesn't mean that the Johnson family can relax. CJ mentions that they have to stay on top of their game.

Kendl mentions that in Las Venturas and San Fierro there are problems that don't seem to come to an end. Sweet, as usual, says that there's still a lot to handle right here in Grove Street. Then, the door opens, and CJ, Sweet, and Cesar immediately rise – with their guns pointed.

This is a quick moment of suspense that keeps the player/audience excited. But it also shows that these three now run the streets and aren't to be messed with.

But the guests who show up bring a smile to our faces. Ken Rosenberg comes in peace with Madd Dogg as well as Kent Paul and Maccer. Madd Dogg announces that they've got their first gold record.

Everyone cheers, and indeed, there are plenty of reasons to be happy. They then decide what to do next. Kendl suggests meeting up with Woozie at the casino, but once again, Sweet interjects and says they still need to be on Grove Street.

In the midst of this chatter, CJ quietly starts walking away. Kendl sees him and asks where he's going.

He responds:

“Fittin’ to the hit the block, see what’s happening.”

And then we fade to black, and the credits roll.

There's always a sense of satisfaction when one completes a GTA game and watches the credits roll. The credits for this game are truly a pleasure to watch as we explore the whole of San Andreas. I particularly love the shots of the camera going from underwater to above the surface. Another shot of the camera going through one of the cylinders from a destroyed plane in Verdant Meadows is also great.

But the writers weren't finished. After the credits roll, we see the perfect scene. CJ is standing in front of his house.

At the beginning of the story, he says that Grove Street is his home, or perhaps it was his home before he “fucked everything up.” But now, we see CJ standing confidently in front of

his house. Now, Grove Street *is* his home. He's now got more respect than ever – and his character arc has peaked.

The riots have finally come to an end. But even if the Grove Street Families hold all territories, there's always the constant threat of a takeover by a rival gang.

As a result, CJ doesn't know what the future holds, but the possibilities are endless. It is both exciting and frightening at the same time. Yet, for the player/audience, it nevertheless seems brights.

And then, CJ's phone rings.

And once again, it's a hilarious exchange between him and Catalina, with her moaning as she's having sex with Claude!

No matter how much of a big shot CJ has become, he still can't get Catalina off his back! At least, not for a few years.

This is a perfect ending.

There's a buildup to the final mission. Then, there are emotional moments as CJ realizes he has to take Big Smoke down. There's non-stop, edge-of-your-seat action, an emotional climax with Big Smoke, a suspenseful chase, a fitting conclusion to an evil villain, a vision of optimism for the future, and one final hilarious phone call.

This is how you end a story.

One notable observation is that The Truth isn't in the final scene in the Johnson house despite the fact that he's seen on Grove Street as Tenpenny dies. This could be an oversight from the writers...or it could be that he had to leave somewhere – and that we won't hear from him again. Perhaps we'll just have to assure ourselves that The Truth will always be out there!

“This business is bigger than any gang, ese.”

Themes

Let's now explore a few thematic elements that add to the story's richness. While your focus should always be on telling an entertaining story, this lesson can show you how to use narrative storytelling to explore certain themes.

Morality and Moral Ambiguity

Let's first get this out of the way: *GTA: San Andreas* is entertainment and should be enjoyed as such. This game and all games in the franchise have been the subject of controversy and have had to deal with multiple attacks and even attempts to ban it. The story and gameplay are not here to impose morality. It's entertainment, and that's all there is to it.

Nevertheless, the game's story and characters do raise some interesting questions about morality. It's not here to teach a lesson or to preach – rather, it's here to make one think.

CJ is the story's protagonist, but is he the hero? He definitely does heroic things, and we root for him. Anyone who plays the game feels a great sense of satisfaction as you see CJ's respect increase as the game progresses.

Any GTA game's main playable character(s) commit crimes. But CJ is often regarded as one of the best protagonists from the franchise. This is because while he might commit crimes, he also does things that are genuinely good.

CJ is one of the protagonists in a GTA game who has admirable qualities that we cheer for. It's why this game still holds up 20 years later. While graphics and technology have advanced, many fans still feel that *GTA: San Andreas* has the **best story** (<https://www.sportskeeda.com/gta/what-makes-storyline-gta-san-andreas-iconic-one-series>)—and our protagonist plays a large part in this.

Is it good that CJ takes the law into his own hands to take down rival gangs such as the Ballas? From all the gangs depicted, it's clear that the Grove Street Families are the most moral. While they might be as involved in crime as the rival gangs, they stay away from drug dealing – and go after drug peddlers.

The Grove Street Families aren't good, but they are the lesser of the two evils. What about C.R.A.S.H.? The department's responsibility is to go after gangs – who are otherwise criminals. But when Tenpenny and Pulaski manipulate honest cops like Hernandez and murder Pendelbury, among a plethora of other crimes, are they the good guys? They certainly are not.

Between the Grove Street Families and C.R.A.S.H., it's quite clear that the latter is the greater of two evils. Tenpenny said that the town would be clean if there were more of him – but at what cost?

One may look at the game's story and think that it carries an anti-police message. But the writers have made it clear that it's anti-police corruption. Officer Pendelbury is one of those characters who's never seen or heard but whose presence is felt. We know that he's an honest officer who wants to expose Tenpenny and Pulaski.

We also know that Hernandez is an honest cop. Even when he calls CJ at the start of the story, his voice isn't assertive – and almost has to request, rather than demand, CJ to show him respect – and not call him a “bitch.” The supplementary introduction film shows us **more of Hernandez's decency** (<https://youtu.be/D-wLIAISF9I?t=984>).

Sadly, Hernandez is never able to take down Tenpenny and Pulaski and gets killed by the latter. At the end of the day, it's CJ who takes down both corrupt officers. The corrupt officers from a corrupt system are taken down by a criminal rather than an actual honest officer. In *GTA: San Andreas*, this is part of the entertainment. In reality, such a scenario would cause ordinary citizens to have sleepless nights.

Toreno is also morally ambiguous, made clear through his personality and actions. He reveals to CJ that he knows how Tenpenny and Pulaski **are controlling him** (<https://youtu.be/VSmhtlus-Go?t=33>). When CJ asks him why he doesn't try to stop them, he responds:

“You just don't understand, do you, kid? Look, it's all white knights and heroes. We have to make decisions, kid. You know, I try to set bad people on other bad people, and sometimes, I let good guys die. He's your brother, but to me, he's just collateral. It's a very delicate decision. Over here, you got all the scumbags inside the country, and over here, you got all the scumbags outside the country. And me and my colleagues, we're the fucking pivot, keep the government in work.”

Toreno is simultaneously one of the darkest, most ruthless, but most honorable characters in the entire franchise. What also makes him interesting is his moral ambiguity. He knows about Tenpenny and Pulaski's corruption.

Yet, he doesn't choose to go after them to protect CJ. Rather, he wants to take advantage of CJ to handle their tasks.

At times, he reminds CJ that he owns him – and tells him that Sweet is “just collateral” and that if CJ takes too long to learn how to fly, Sweet will have to suffer.

At the same time, if CJ is loyal to Toreno, and someone tries to mess with Sweet, then “a prison guard goes home and finds that his wife and kids have been murdered.”

The player/audience will like Toreno because he's loyal to CJ and sticks to his word by having Sweet released from prison. Yet, we know that behind the scenes, he'll have to do immoral things for "the greater good."

These are just a few examples of the morally ambiguous characters/moments in the game's story. Once again, the point is not to preach a certain worldview. Rather, by creating morally ambiguous characters, the story becomes much more interesting.

This is a great lesson for writers. Many of the most interesting stories aren't about good and evil. This is because most people are always shades of gray. If you're writing a crime story, it's unlikely that anyone in the story is completely innocent. The protagonist in this story is a gangbanger, but the cops are corrupt as well, and even **the preacher** (<https://youtu.be/5Rjp3y8VqfU?t=411>) has a curious way of "saving" the "po' girl."

However, there is one moral lesson that's told throughout the game. One crime is completely unacceptable in the story – and that's selling drugs. The game does have a very strong anti-drug message. In the short time that we see B Dup and Big Bear, we clearly see that the drug dealer is vile, and the drug addict is a victim. These scenes are quite serious, and B Dup's crimes are not glorified.

When CJ learns of Big Smoke's drug dealing, he eventually decides to destroy his crack factory by blowing it up. There are even side missions where CJ can kill Big Smoke's drug couriers. The first time we see CJ kill someone, he stomps on a dope pusher.

Immediately afterward, CJ and Ryder greet the "Balla dope pushers" and beat the fuck out of them! Not to mention, CJ chides Madd Dogg for giving away his mansion to the drug dealer Big Poppa – and ends up killing him. This is a moral lesson that isn't preached to us, but it's very clear that the writers took a moral stance about the evils of drugs, and that there is no honor in being a drug dealer.

Karm

The Dharmic concept of Karm/Karma has different perspectives, but broadly, it revolves around dealing with the consequences of one's actions. Often, these can be in the next life. In *GTA: San Andreas*, we see many examples of characters facing the consequences of their actions.

Once more, without being preachy, the story shows us that bad actions will result in a punishment. There are so many examples of this that one needn't go into all of them.

Here are a few that stand out:

- Ryder and Big Smoke get killed by CJ for betraying Grove Street Families
- Various drug pushers getting killed

- B Dup gets beaten down by Big Bear, a consequence of enslaving him through crack addiction
- Tenpenny and Pulaski get killed, and they both die alone, without anyone to defend them
 - Hernandez is willing to sacrifice his life to attack Pulaski to save CJ – in other words, Tenpenny and Pulaski try to manipulate and then kill an honest cop, who helps CJ survive so they can both be taken down
- CJ has to prove himself to Sweet and the Grove Street Families after escaping to Liberty City for five years
- Jizzy B, while one of the most entertaining and funny characters, is engaged in one of the vilest professions. CJ gives him the right punishment
- The preacher, while supposed to stand for morality, decides to “rescue” a prostitute only to ask her to perform sexual favors for him. The Lord certainly doesn’t care to protect him from CJ!
- OG Loc eventually loses his record deal, his fame, and CJ’s loyalty after ruining Madd Dogg’s life and career

Of course, if one performs good actions, they’ll be rewarded for their decency. The story has examples of this as well:

- CJ helps Cesar take back his neighborhood after Cesar has helped CJ with almost everything
- While we might get frustrated with Sweet, he didn’t abandon his family. He gets his reward for his actions when CJ returns and decides to prove himself and help his brother, and the Grove Street Families
- Woozie always looks out for CJ and gets helped in return – often, CJ offers to help him without needing to be asked. As a reward, CJ also becomes part-owner of The Four Dragons Casino
- CJ rescues the refugees from the human traffickers. This is one of the most decent and humane actions that CJ takes and is one of the most fulfilling parts of the story. I had to mention it. Woozie, of course, rewards him
- CJ gets hired as Madd Dogg’s manager and gets to stay in his mansion after saving his life
- CJ does as Toreno asks, and thus, Sweet gets saved
- Grove Street was home until CJ fucked everything up. He makes up for fucking things up, and his actions lead him to get a lot of fucking respect!

The game and the franchise as a whole will always be criticized for portraying or even encouraging immorality. However, the story does show that actions have consequences. Good actions will be rewarded, and bad actions will result in punishments.

CJ has many “bosses” throughout the story who give him tasks. Often, some of them can give him a hard time, like Sweet or Toreno. The latter really pisses off CJ a few times, and he doesn’t hesitate to say, “FUCK YOU, TORENO,” and then point a gun at him at one point.

However, CJ only kills bosses who truly disrespect him. At the end of the day, Sweet cares about CJ and their family. Toreno may not necessarily care about CJ, but he is a man of his word. At times, when he praises CJ, it seems genuine.

But there are bosses who reap what they sow and get what’s coming to them. Since bosses like Tenpenny have already been discussed, let’s focus on two minor bosses whom CJ encounters in the middle of the story.

Jizzy B and T-Bone Mendez are both members of the Loco Syndicate. This crime syndicate helps Big Smoke expand his drug operations. So, in other words, they have to go. However, one must also look at how these two bosses treat CJ.

Jizzy B is funny and, at times, rather friendly toward CJ. But one can tell that he doesn’t truly respect CJ. He refers to CJ as a “dumb muscle” and is sometimes condescending or curt toward him. After CJ wastes a rival pimp, he tells Jizzy B not to worry. The latter responds by saying, “Worry? Did I say I was worried?” in a rude manner.

Later, when Jizzy learns that the preacher wants to take one of his girls away from him, whom CJ drove to the hotel, he calls CJ and says, “You is a bad luck charm clucky!”

T-Bone Mendez is never polite to CJ and speaks down to him. When he suspects CJ and wants to test his loyalty, he strangles him and threatens violence against his family. As a result, he gets what he deserves when CJ and Cesar walk up to him at Pier 69 and Cesar shouts, “Mendez, I see you, Rifa motherfucker” and they both take him out.

By showing that one’s actions will result in the direction of one’s life, the writers have given a message without giving a lecture. As it should be!

Atonement

CJ commits many crimes throughout the story and likely never thinks twice about them. But there are times when he reflects upon what he has done and sees the negative consequences of his actions.

Two points of focus are when CJ realizes how he’s allowed Tenpenny to get away with his crimes and when he sees how Madd Dogg’s life has been ruined.

CJ had many moments throughout the story where he could have stepped back. Had the District Attorney remained in power, perhaps he could have taken down Tenpenny and Pulaski. The same goes for the reporter and the informant he meets. When everyone is at

Madd Dogg's mansion, and they watch the court proceedings on TV, they see the charges get dropped.

CJ realizes that he was responsible for this and must atone for it. That's why he and Sweet must take down Tenpenny—everyone else who could have done it is out of the picture.

The same goes for Madd Dogg. When CJ is in Las Venturas, he wonders who's the "idiot" who wants to jump off the hotel roof to kill himself. When he sees that it's Madd Dogg, he realizes his wrongs. Madd Dogg's life has become so pathetic that people are actually placing bets on whether he'll jump to his death.

CJ realizes that he has to be the one to save Madd Dogg – and that Madd Dogg *has* to be saved. As he drives the drunk rapper to the rehabilitation center, he gets offered a job as the manager. He takes it seriously and realizes he must help him revive his career.

This is another message that's subtly shown in the story. The writers may or may not have intended it, but this message enriches the story. It shows that even a gangbanger like CJ has a moral compass and realizes that he has genuinely done wrong. All he can do is to try to help those he wronged, like Madd Dogg, and take down the evil he once helped, like Tenpenny.

Retribution

Another major theme in the story is taking vengeance and punishing those who have committed wrongs. This theme continues the previous two. It also shows that it's often up to the common person to punish evil. It can even suggest that evil will go unpunished if the average person in society does nothing to fight it. As *The Truth* constantly warns us, we can't trust "the system." This could mean that those outside of "the system" are necessary to fight evil.

Hernandez was part of the system and a decent cop, but he couldn't take down Tenpenny and Pulaski. In the introductory film, he gives in to pressure and shoots Officer Pendelbury on Tenpenny's orders. Only the outsider, CJ, could take down these two corrupt officers.

It isn't Tenpenny who tries to end the drug trade in Los Santos – in fact, he helps it. It's up to gang members, run by CJ and Sweet, to take out drug dealers and other rival gangs involved in the drug trade.

This is a great theme from the story. All crime stories are dark and can often be bleak. To use the modern lexicon, they can often "black pill" a player/audience. But by showing retribution and the necessity of punishing evil, the game's story stands the test of time and has a satisfying conclusion.

Loyalty and Respect

Perhaps the best thematic element from the story is when we learn about the importance of loyalty and respect.

Now, one has to show some appreciation for Sweet. Once again, Sweet is a character who's often criticized by players. There's even a criticism that he's not a particularly well-written character, as he doesn't have much nuance.

However, Sweet does display loyalty. While it might be seen as immature that he can't get out of the 'hood mentality, another perspective is that he feels loyal to where he grew up. He feels a duty toward policing the 'hood – otherwise, it'll forever be run by corrupt figures such as Tenpenny.

As the story progresses, CJ learns that he must look after his family—and not run away. When Sweet is injured at the shootout against the Ballas, he tells CJ to escape after it's revealed that Big Smoke and Ryder have betrayed them. But CJ says he'll never leave his brother. When Sweet is in prison, he feels like he'll be there for life, but CJ is loyal to his brother and strives to get him released.

CJ also remains loyal to his sister Kendl. He isn't immediately against her dating Cesar as Sweet is. But he also says that if he mistreats her, "he's dead." CJ is cold with Cesar at first, but he slowly warms up to him when he partakes in the lowrider race. He truly warms up when Cesar reveals the betrayal to him – "I owe you Ces" is what he says. And he takes this seriously. He realizes that Cesar has been loyal to him, and he must do the same in return.

After he's exiled to the countryside, he speaks to Cesar who introduces him to Catalina. Cesar is loyal to CJ and feels that introducing him to Catalina would help him earn the money he'll need. He didn't mention how crazy Catalina was, but that's another matter!

Cesar later calls CJ to tell him that Los Santos has become dangerous again and many of his homies have been killed. He even mentions a **price on his and possibly Kendl's heads** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4WGEN0VPgk>). Interestingly, he says, "Trust, respect, and honor don't mean jack in Los Santos now."

CJ tells them they must escape and come down to the countryside. He tells Cesar he can't lose another sibling.

This is a really powerful scene. We see how much CJ cares about his family and how he realizes that he wasn't loyal to them. We see one of the first signs of his regret – that he shouldn't have fled Los Santos to move to Liberty City – at a time when his family needed him the most.

CJ exemplifies the importance of loyalty at various times throughout the story. He looks out for Woozie, who always looks out for him. Even though Sweet can get on his nerves, he

never abandons him. While he looks beyond the ‘hood, he never entirely abandons the Grove Street Families.

Respect is another major aspect of CJ’s character arc. Many missions in the game increase CJ’s respect meter. Apart from this offering advantages to the player, it’s also a great way to progress the story.

When CJ returns to Los Santos, he is not respected. Sweet and Ryder constantly push him around and almost resent his return. However, as the story progresses, CJ’s respect increases as he completes different missions. The player/audience can see how CJ is treated with more respect.

He can recruit gang members willing to follow his lead for a gang war. He can stand up to B Dup much more than when they first encounter each other. As CJ’s respect increases, he becomes more assertive. When he and Cesar decide to rob a car showroom to steal two cars, CJ doesn’t hesitate to **tell the salesman to leave!**
(https://youtu.be/9_XoYVGFsoc?t=95)

Plus, CJ can have up to six girlfriends in the game – and two (Denise and Millie) are default as part of the main missions. Clearly, the man has respect! When he rescues Denise, she says that she knows all about him.

The writers have done a great job showcasing these two thematic elements in the story. These help us understand each character’s humanity. The previous game, *GTA: Vice City*, also had an excellent story. One thing lacking was that Tommy Vercetti was a fantastic character but not relatable.

But when you see how CJ cares for his sister, you forget that he’s a gangster and realize he’s the ideal brother. When we see CJ and Cesar’s friendship grow, we appreciate it – that we set aside their crimes for a moment to appreciate their loyalty. This is what makes us have an emotional connection to the story and its characters.

When writing a story, the focus shouldn’t necessarily be on the theme—it should be on the plot and characters. However, the best stories tackle various themes we think about in real life.

In reality, we think about the importance of family loyalty, friendship, making up for our mistakes, doing good actions, considering the consequences of our actions, and so on. Because of these themes, *GTA: San Andreas* is considered one of the best stories in the franchise.

“Man cannot live on bread alone.”

Key Takeaways

Let's summarize some of the best elements in the game's story and what they can teach you when you write your own stories.

1. Even when your characters have negative traits (criminality, as an example) you'll have to add a human element to make them relatable
2. The dark stories last longer if they have humor
3. Over-the-top action never gets out of fashion
4. An epic story should span multiple locations that look different to make it more interesting
5. If you have an ensemble cast, vary the demographics
 - a. Make them have different cultural/ethnic backgrounds
 - b. Different socioeconomic classes
 - c. Different professions
 - d. Contrasting ways of speaking, slang, multilingualism
6. Dialogue is memorable if it's fantastical – it doesn't always have to be realistic or bland
7. Describe character's appearances in detail to add to the setting and their personality
8. Radio doesn't have to be something in the background – it can play an integral part of advancing the story
9. Characters can have a presence even if they aren't seen – Officer Pendelbury (never seen), Madd Dogg (not seen until later), Big Smoke (not seen in the middle of the story), Berkley (never seen), Brian Johnson (never seen) and Beverly Johnson (never seen, except in a photo), etc.
10. Minor characters should also be made memorable – don't waste creating an interesting character even if they're barely in the story
 - a. Examples can include B Dup & Big Bear, Emmett, Freddy, Jimmy Silverman
11. Exaggerating political beliefs, mannerisms, and stereotypes makes great comedy
12. Characters who are honorable will be likable, even if they otherwise can be dark – such as Toreno
13. Foreshadowing a betrayal makes a player revisit a story – an example can be seeing what led to Big Smoke's betrayal, such as **living in Ballas territory** (<https://youtu.be/E1aTlYlfzRk?t=294>) or **interrupting CJ and Sweet** (<https://youtu.be/E1aTlYlfzRk?t=101>) when the subject of their mother's death comes up
14. Showing how one atones for one's wrongdoings is great for character arc/development
15. Showing how one's actions, good or bad, will lead to the appropriate consequences
16. Balance segments of high action with calmer moments to ease the tension and keep the suspense

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17. Repeat dialogue to create references – like when Tenpenny says “see you around like a donut, Carl” in the beginning and CJ says “See you around...officer!” at the end; Another example is that CJ’s first kill involves him stomping a dope pusher. Later, he stomps on Pulaski to kill him
18. Add humor at high points in the story – like whenever Catalina calls CJ
19. Showing the importance of family, loyalty, looking after siblings always makes crime stories appealing
20. A protagonist is relatable if we see how his/her respect increases throughout the story – this character arc makes the story more interesting

The game remains a classic because of its superb storytelling in addition to its gameplay. Regardless of what medium you wish to write for, the lessons you can learn from playing *GTA: San Andreas* are countless.

“See you around...officer!”

Conclusion

GTA: San Andreas hasn't aged in the past 20 years, and, if anything, it's just as fresh today as it was upon its initial release. If you listen to WCTR, you'll be shocked, and maybe saddened, at how relevant the banter is to today's political and culture wars.

It remains a fun game to play, but many players also enjoy it for its brilliant story. The narrative, the characters, dialogue, humor, scenery, and much more have held up to this day. Whether you're playing it for the first time or the hundredth time, the world of *GTA: San Andreas* immerses you.

It's one of the games that elevated video games to an art form and remains a masterpiece. Whatever your preferred medium is, if you wish to pursue narrative writing, there's a lot you'll learn from playing *GTA: San Andreas*.

So now, you know what to do.

It's time for you to head back to Grove Street. Just remember that CJ needs to always be strapped – 'cause you never know when the 'hood will be under attack!

“...I thought you was going to, uh, college.”

Further Study and References

My appreciation and interpretations of *GTA: San Andreas*' story and characters has come from playing the game from start to finish several times. I've also gained a deeper understanding and explored other story interpretations from other gamers who love the game.

Here, I'm including a few pieces of media, other than what's been linked directly in the guide, that were used to research this writing masterclass. They can also help you appreciate the story, the characters, the lore, and the context a lot more.

Readings

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Video

- “Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas - 18 Years Later.” *YouTube*, FuzzySlippers, 12 Dec. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vs1RAoLvJ-8
- “The Grand Theft Auto Game Everyone Loves.” *YouTube*, GmanLives, 16 Aug. 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPCYLuEwZ7M

Channels

- The Criminal Historian (<https://www.youtube.com/@TheCriminalHistorian/videos>)
- Ls Central (<https://www.youtube.com/@LScentral/videos>)

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