OF MYTHICAL CITIES, ACTOR-NETWORKS, AND AMERICAN CULTURE: THOUGHTS ON THE CULTURAL WORK OF GRAND THEFT AUTO

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The following essay is the english version by the author of this earlier guest contribution.

This contribution’s thesis is so inconspicuous that one should consider it more closely: *Grand Theft Auto* [1] is an active participant in American culture. It should be stressed that to argue this is something entirely different from merely recognizing that *Grand Theft Auto* represents multiple aspects of American culture and society. A statement like that locates the series somehow outside of what it depicts, namely that which we, somewhat inaccurately, call American culture. Even when, despite its British origin, the series is considered a part of American culture, *Grand Theft Auto*’s cultural work is usually not only limited to a representational level, but also simply postulated instead of tracing its concrete instances. This contribution, on the other hand, suggests a method with an action-based argumentation, which illuminates the mutually effective relationship between *Grand Theft Auto* and American culture and thus locates the series and its cultural work in this culture.

The approach presented here is based on Bruno Latour’s version of actor-network-theory and Frank Kelleter’s adaptation of Latour (combined with Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory) for the study of popular culture. Here culture is understood as action-based, “as something that keeps happening,” [2] and as something that “is fundamentally dependent on the repetition and variation of narratives.” [3] In this context, texts like, for example, videogames, are treated “not [as] something that is but [as] something that does: not a single outlook or structure waiting to be decoded or uncovered but an entanglement of textual practices.” [4] It is, therefore, all about the actions of cultural actors and about following and describing how an actor comes to act in a particular way. In our case, the question is hence why *Grand Theft Auto* acts in a certain way and which actors it, in turn, *prompts to act* in which ways. To describe *Grand Theft Auto* as an actor-network in this case means to understand it as the series of videogames and “the communicative practices accompanying it” and to describe how each has an impact on the other. [5] The point is not the interpretation of game content but the identification and description of concrete actions and their implications as they happen around *Grand Theft Auto*, drawing on diverse accounts, for example, academic articles or interviews with the developers. In a sense, this is an empirical approach, which does not ask where a game comes from geographically or what it depicts—though the latter remains important—but which cultural agencies are demonstrably active in a game as well as what work this game performs in the culture. In this case, and under the mentioned action-based understanding of culture, this means that *Grand Theft Auto* must be understood as part of what we call American culture even as it was originally a British product.
Everything starts with the development of the first GTA. Originally planned as a kind of cops and robbers in an open, urban gameworld, the developers at DMA Design at some point turned the game principle on its head to make the game more playable and more entertaining—now it was robbers and cops, with the player constantly on the run. It was at this point that American culture began to decisively act upon this game which, at the time, was under development in Dundee, Scotland. As soon as the cops and robbers principle had been turned around, the developers began to implement references to Hollywood films, ranging from Reservoir Dogs to The French Connection. [6] The use of these particular examples goes back to two circumstances that are also connected to each other: the general dominance of American popular culture on the international entertainment market and the correspondence of the game’s principle with a traditional American genre, the gangster film, which made referencing iconic Hollywood films of this kind the logical thing to do. Hence, the work of American culture within the series began with the conception of Grand Theft Auto’s game principle, even as GTA at the time had no material ties to the United States. This dynamic continued in following years and got more pronounced with subsequent releases. [7]

The second important creative decision at that time concerned the setting. Theoretically, GTA could have been set anywhere—which is proven already by the first add-on, London 1969—and even the intertextual references could have worked. Nonetheless, the fictional cities of Liberty City, Vice City, and San Andreas openly referenced New York, Miami, and San Francisco. Marketing apparently played a big role here since American settings always sold. Thus, Grand Theft Auto was suffused by the agencies of American culture from the beginning, which intensified further after GTA III. Viewed from an actor-network perspective, one can note how, through its influence on the British developers, American culture makes a noticeable difference in the development of GTA and thus actively shapes the series.

So far, so obvious. Of course, everybody familiar with Grand Theft Auto knows that the series somehow incorporates American culture into its representations. But what becomes clear here is how this can be traced back to specific decisions which are informed by various agencies. Put simply: Grand Theft Auto could be entirely different, but it is not; it is what it is because particular agencies of American culture decisively influenced the development process. As Latour writes: “An actor is what is made to act by many others.” [8]

It gets much more interesting if we now continue to trace the flow of cultural agencies and ask, which work the series, in turn, performs in American culture. Which actors does Grand Theft Auto lead to which actions, which lastingly contribute to the (re)-production of American culture? What I mean here are less the obvious examples of how the series itself becomes a point of reference in American popular culture, but rather which narratives about America it produces beyond its own representations. As Kelleter reminds us, such secondary texts, “especially when they operate within and on the same environment as” the objects they are concerned with, “are always also acts of cultural self-description—and they can be analyzed as such, to trace dependencies between a culture’s knowledge and performance of itself, ideally from a perspective not directly contributing to such self-identifications.”[9] Precisely such self-descriptions contribute decisively to the repetition and variation of narratives constituting a particular culture.

In the case of Grand Theft Auto, the series’ cultural work can hence be measured especially by the self-descriptions the games produce within American culture. Once a certain matter reaches a critical mass because it has been expressed repeatedly through different actors, one
can say that the (communicative) actions of these actors produce a durable state as they make a difference in the culture by leaving their traces. These are the constellations through which a culture exists at a given moment. Specifically, the *Grand Theft Auto* series performs cultural work with regard to several matters here: for example, the continuation of the myth of the American Dream, a paradigm shift in the view of videogames in American society, and the ongoing debates about structural racism and the effects of a comprehensive neoliberalization. For lack of space, however, this contribution will only cover one matter exemplarily: the reproduction of the myths of iconic American metropoles.[10] This is a particularly instructive example since it allows us to observe the entire range of entanglements between *Grand Theft Auto* and American culture.

It is widely accepted that *Grand Theft Auto*’s gameworlds constitute fictional, stylized simulations of American cities. Precisely these cities are among the most imagined locales in the world; they are mythical places, which are depicted so frequently in literature, film, and television that their media images have largely replaced the real cities in the popular imagination. Especially Los Angeles, as scholars from Mike Davis to Jean Baudrillard have stated, appears tantamount to a myth or a simulacrum. *Grand Theft Auto*’s success in creating such convincing gameworlds is largely founded on its reference to previous representations of these cities as well as on the approach of replicating them symbolically rather than with cartographic accuracy.[11] Los Santos, it is often noted, for example, largely simulates the Los Angeles of Hollywood films. Despite this influence of pop cultural representations, there has been a second logic at work in the development process since *GTA III*: a desire for realism. This becomes apparent in extensive on-site research by Rockstar’s teams, which are intended to capture the atmosphere of different areas in order to replicate them in the games,[12] and in comments by the developers that recognizable references to actual cities present better opportunities for storytelling and making statements.[13]

Here we can see two interesting things that are central for understanding the work of *Grand Theft Auto* in American culture in this respect. First, the real-world cities feature as direct referents in addition to their media representations. It is not enough for Rockstar to create playable versions of already circulating media images; rather, the goal is to establish recognizable relations to the actual cities. Second, the efforts to create a sensation of realism appear to be based on the assumption that there are certain essential qualities that distinguish each of the places referenced; if only one can identify, capture, and reproduce these in the gameworld, the experience will feel real(istic). Hence, two parallel yet at the same time contradictory forces are at work in the production of *Grand Theft Auto*’s virtual urban environments: the pull of prior representations in popular culture and the urge to replicate (parts of) real places based on some presumed essential qualities. Interestingly, both forces also exert influence on *Grand Theft Auto*’s reception and strongly inform how the series is talked about.

Since I cannot discuss all facets of this phenomenon in detail here, I will only briefly sketch out the main tendencies, referencing three exemplary accounts. Practically all authors who write about place in *Grand Theft Auto* highlight that the games depict fictional cities which mainly draw on the popular cultural imagination, yet they regularly talk about them as if they were quasi-realistic representations of actual places. An early example of this can be found in Ian Bogost and Dan Kainbaum, who talk about a “translation” of Miami and Los Angeles into the fictional cities of Vice City and Los Santos.[14] Besides the impression that, in the authors’ view, the real cities are without a doubt the games’ main referents—though their text clearly differentiates between real places and their representations—their concept of translation encompasses the replication of both the “atmosphere” of the actual cities and the
spirit of these cities as they exist in popular culture.”[15] Here *Grand Theft Auto* appears to capture a certain spirit both of the real referents and of something that only exists in representational form across a cluster of media objects; both layers collapse almost naturally into a single phenomenon. The basis for this is exactly the assumption that, on an affective level, the places represented possess essential qualities that can be captured and reproduced. Since these merge immediately with the representations in popular culture, however, precisely the cultural work that supplants the actual place with the myth is continued here.

Something similar can be found in Soraya Murray’s article on *San Andreas*. She identifies the concrete references to popular culture in the game early on, only to write later that “Los Santos feels very much like Los Angeles” (emphasis added).[16] At the same time, there is no indication as to which Los Angeles is being referenced here, the city located in Southern California or the myth circulating in popular culture. This, however, does not really seem to matter at all precisely because this is a place where media representation and the real-world location have become practically indistinguishable in public perception. When *Grand Theft Auto* recreates the affective dimension of this phenomenon, the virtual city simultaneously resembles both the real place and the media image because both collapse into one, reproducing the ongoing simulation of Los Angeles.

The modus operandi of this phenomenon becomes particularly apparent when both Bogost and Murray invoke their superior knowledge as locals of the place in their analyses.[17] This is already interesting because there is, of course, no real Los Santos; in both cases it is immediately accepted that Los Santos is some kind of simulation of Los Angeles simply because the former succeeds in evoking sensations of the latter. Bogost, who brings up his past residence in Los Angeles in service of a comparison between the levels of realism in *San Andreas* and another game, attributes the more convincing representation in *San Andreas* to the approach of “symbolic representation” applied in the game because the experience of the real place, too—entrapped in its own pop cultural myth—appears to depend on “symbolic perceptions.”[18]

Los Santos is convincing even to someone who knows Los Angeles, like Bogost, precisely because players relate the symbolic references in the gameworld to their own personal experiences and complement one with the other, regardless of whether these are experiences of the real place or of works of fiction.[19] Murray addresses her status as a born “Angelina” during her review of *GTA V* to underscore how “unlike LA and uncannily accurate at the same time” Los Santos replicates her home town.[20] Although she explicitly describes how, in *GTA V*, “it is more like being in an LA film” instead of the actual metropolis, she cannot but relate the sense of place in Los Santos to her own experiences of Los Angeles, as the game apparently produces the sensation of the actual city somehow.

Similar logics can be traced across a variety of other texts on *Grand Theft Auto*. Concerning the question of culturally locating the series, the issue sketched out here nicely illustrates how certain agencies of American culture are at work in *Grand Theft Auto* and how they can be traced back to the actions of empirically existing actors. *Grand Theft Auto* processes iconic American cities precisely because of their recognizability, initially drawing on previous representations from popular culture. This creates further representations of the same kind, thus continuing their cultural work. As the series finally causes various actors to discuss the games’ cities on the same level as their real as well as pop cultural models, the equation of actual places with their medial representations is continued beyond the games themselves, which leads to the reproduction of already existing myths.
To sum up, one can state that Grand Theft Auto actively participates in the ongoing simulation of American metropoles, which has practically supplanted the actual places in the popular imagination. It works through the double logic of reproducing common representations and simultaneously aspiring to capture a presumed essence of their real-life models, a logic that repeatedly finds confirmation in numerous accounts of individual parts of the series. What connects both production and reception here is exactly this sense that each of these places possesses some essential, defining qualities to begin with, which, in turn, is always already implicated in previous and ongoing mediations of the cities in question; despite their fundamental difference, both points thus collapse into a single phenomenon.

Hence, it is not simply because Grand Theft Auto depicts American scenarios that it belongs to and works within American culture. Instead, one can trace, on the one hand, the work of American culture in Grand Theft Auto by following the actions of empirically real actors and, on the other hand, how the series prompts other actors, who are located within this culture and thus contribute to its self-descriptions, to act in particular ways, i.e., to produce particular accounts of the games (and the culture). Regardless of its British origin, the series is hence embedded in a complex network permeated by, as well as partly reproductive of, the agencies of American culture through the mutually effective relationships between various actors. [21]

Concerning the application of the method sketched out here to other objects of Game Studies research, it should thus be underscored that, in order to shed light on the cultural work of any videogame or series of games, one should never view the game on its own but must understand it in the sense of an actor-network; the game is one actor among many others on an equal footing, all of which work upon each other in their own individual, manifold ways, make differences to states of affairs, and, through their actions, produce lasting (cultural) constellations, at least temporarily. As important as the analysis of the videogame as the primary text remains under this approach, it is essential to at times leave the game behind in order to follow the many actors it sets into motion.

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[1] When I write Grand Theft Auto, I refer to the entire series, and when I use short forms, I refer to individual titles.
[7] For example, the developers repeatedly highlighted their ambitions to create something
like interactive gangster movies with *Grand Theft Auto*.


[10] In the chapter of my dissertation on which this text is based and which is still in progress, I examine all of these matters in detail, spend more time on the origin of the series, and, additionally, illuminate some examples of how the mentioned matters are working within *GTA V*.


[15] Ibid.


[17] Bogost and Murray both used to live in Los Angeles, Murray is even from there originally.


[21] Viewed under this approach, one must also note that *Grand Theft Auto* just does not act on British culture to the same degree or even in the same way since it does not produce self-descriptions of it that would be comparable to the ones outlined here.