Sören Schoppmeier
**Playing American**

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Sören Schoppmeier

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Open-World Videogames and the
Reproduction of American Culture

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It is a great shame if ‘America’ is always to be left to the Americans.

– Sergio Leone

They’ve all come to look for America.

– Simon and Garfunkel, “America”

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# Contents

# Abbreviations of Videogame Titles

| | |
|---|---|
| *GTA* | *Grand Theft Auto* (1997) |
| *GTA 2* | *Grand Theft Auto 2* (1999) |
| *GTA III* | *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) |
| *GTA IV* | *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) |
| *GTA V* | *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) |
| *RDR* | *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) |
| *RDR2* | *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) |
| *San Andreas* | *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) |
| *Vice City* | *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002) |
| *WD* | *Watch Dogs* (2014) |
| *WD2* | *Watch Dogs 2* (2016) |

*Grand Theft Auto*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *Watch Dogs* are spelled out whenever either series at large is concerned.


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# Introduction

Videogames[1] are agents of cultural reproduction. They not only reflect ideas, habits, dispositions, and other structures circulating in a culture; they actively participate in it. One publicly visible example of this has been the connection between the ongoing harassment of women and progressive voices in the videogame industry and the rise of the so-called Alt-Right in the United States alongside Donald Trump's presidential campaign and subsequent presidency. What is now known as GamerGate, derived from a hashtag by actor Adam Baldwin, has been a large-scale discharge of coordinated harassment – ranging from doxing and swatting to rape and death threats – against women in the videogame industry, with media critic Anita Sarkeesian and game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu being only the most prominent of many targets. The events now subsumed under the label began in 2012 and reached their peak in 2014, but they have a longer history at the same time as they are still ongoing in different forms. GamerGate has since been connected to the rise of a new far-right movement of which the so-called Alt-Right and the Trump presidency are but two expressions.[2] After decades of largely misguided and disproportionate moral panic about videogame violence, videogame addiction, and other ostensibly detrimental effects of videogames on children and teenagers, GamerGate demonstrated that a full-grown problem of a different kind had emerged from gam-

**1** I use the term 'videogames' rather than 'digital games' or 'computer games' to emphasize that "[v]ideogames are not a core game wrapped in an interchangeable audiovisual skin; videogames are materially constituted *by* their audiovisuality," as Brendan Keogh argues (12). I adopt his position that "[v]ideogames very much *are* successors of cinema, print, literature, and new media *as well as* a continuation of a millenia-long history of games" (Keogh 10). Consequently, I also generally privilege the term 'videogames' over 'games,' specifically spelled as one word to underscore the condition of "videogames as a hybrid of audiovisuality and game aspects" (Keogh 12, n2). For this reason, *Playing American* deliberately diverges from the two-word spelling used throughout the Video Games and the Humanities book series. I would like to thank the publisher and the editors for privileging authorial integrity over stylistic consistency vis-à-vis the other books in the series and approve my divergence from the preferred spelling.

**2** For some insights into GamerGate, its roots, and implications by two scholars directly affected, see Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw's "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity" as well as "Reflections on the Casual Games Market in a Post-GamerGate World" by Shaw and Chess. For elaborations on the connection between GamerGate and the latest rise of the far right, see David Nieborg and Maxwell Foxman's "Mainstreaming Misogyny: The Beginning of the End and the End of the Beginning in Gamergate Coverage," Matt Lees's "What Gamergate Should Have Taught Us about the 'Alt-Right,'" Kristin M. S. Bezio's "Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right," and Ian Sherr and Erin Carson's "GamerGate to Trump: How Video Game Culture Blew Everything Up."


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ing culture. It was not reducible to videogames themselves, let alone specific genres or titles. A zealous coalition of misogynists and reactionaries had coalesced around gamers, industry members, online communities frequenting select areas of websites like *reddit* and *4chan*, YouTubers, bloggers, and more established right-wing figures. As Soraya Murray explains, "GamerGate can be thought of as a paradigmatic irruption of something that would normally remain pervasive but invisible into public view" (*On* 39). It was not really about videogames, and at the same time, videogames were the essential element that channeled these forces and held them together. The world of videogames thus staged what David Nieborg and Maxwell Foxman call "the start of an ongoing culture war that extends far beyond the world of gaming and continues to the present day. For those who think that Gamergate is over, think again . . . . [I]ts infrastructure, ideology, and methods are very much intact; its members are primed to take on the next battle" (125). Jamie Woodcock comes to a similar conclusion: "From Gamergate to the alt-right, we can no longer ignore videogames as a field of cultural struggle. This does not call for censoring videogames, but rather for understanding that battles of ideas are won and lost on this terrain" (162–163). If anyone had any doubt that videogames matter culturally, and not just as popular entertainment, the insight that what may have seemed like a series of events confined to the videogame industry was actually a direct prelude to the large-scale shift to the (far) right in the United States now associated with Trumpism and the so-called Alt-Right must have erased those doubts.[3]

Cultural processes, however, are not always as visible as in the case of GamerGate – which showed itself as "the canary in the coalmine" only in hindsight (Lees) – and its aftermath. Whether in plain sight or as a latent force, however, there is no doubt that videogames have long left their mark on American culture in different ways, just as television, cinema, radio, and literature had before (cf. Wills 3–9). Beyond reflecting manifold aspects of American culture in their selections of themes, settings, and intertextual references, videogames and the cultures that have formed around them have affected language use, film aesthetics, educational methods, media corporations and franchises, and popular culture at large. In short, videogames have long ceased to be a subculture or a minor entertainment medium, if these were ever even appropriate labels. They are, in fact, inseparable from American culture more generally, as Murray stresses: "[P]lainly, the consideration of games *as culture* is both viable and urgently necessary" (*On* 14).

**3** For an exemplary analysis of the connection between the United States under Trumpism and AAA videogames, see my article "Playing to Make America Great Again: *Far Cry 5* and the Politics of Videogames in the Age of Trumpism."

Proceeding from the view that videogames and culture cannot be separated, I contend that some videogames work to reproduce American culture. Reproduction, as I use the concept here, means neither copying nor merely representing something already there, even though the latter does retain a vital role. Cultural reproduction, in fact, goes further: it is an act of maintaining the endurance of the culture itself. Without cultural reproduction, a culture ceases to exist. Reproductive processes are not processes of duplication; reproduction always involves variation and the possibility of change. This book traces the participation of a distinct form of videogames, of which three series serve as quintessential examples, in the reproduction of American culture. I argue that the phenomenon of playing American, as elicited by the *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* videogames, works to reproduce American culture transnationally and along distinct parameters, of which the logics of a globally operating, advanced neoliberal capitalism, a racially inflected surveillance regime, and the withdrawal from history are only three examples.

## Playing American and the Reproduction of American Culture

When I speak of American culture in this book, I refer to something specifically related to the United States of America even as it circulates transnationally. This is not meant to negate the fact that privileging the United States when referring to anything American has been doing substantial work in ignoring or even erasing the significance of all the other nations and cultures on the American continent from Canada to Chile. Neither is it meant to suggest a single, coherent culture even within the United States, to "continue surreptitiously to support the notion that such a whole exists," to quote Janice Radway's famous presidential address to the American Studies Association (2). Despite the lingering focus on the United States, the field of American Studies has moved beyond such artificially drawn cultural boundaries and simplifications in the twenty-first century, and this book is not looking back. Nonetheless, I use the term 'American culture' in its singular form deliberately in relation to the United States to trace the functioning and self-perception of the cultural assemblage at stake here. Even then it remains a fraught term, as Winfried Fluck summarizes:

> 'American' in the exceptionalist version refers to particular national characteristics ('Wesensmerkmale') and particular national virtues. But there is another possible use of the word, in which the term 'American' refers not to a mythic national identity but to a particular set of economic, social or cultural conditions that, for historical and other reasons, are different from those of other countries and nations. ("Theories" 82)

Although the first meaning plays an important role for my argument on the level of analysis, the second one is crucial. There is something peculiar about the United States and the cultural processes at work within and beyond the boundaries of its nation state, which, transnational as they are, always gravitate back toward the US, functioning as an ostensibly associating force. The question then is, as Sascha Pöhlmann writes in relation to Radway, "how imagined communities are imagined and how they attain reality through symbolic and material practices, and how these shape identities, politics, societies, and individual lives" ("Introduction" 7). While there are, without a doubt, many American cultures, there is also something commonly and ingenuously referred to as American culture within and without the United States, and I am interested in how this peculiar thing sustains itself and what role videogames might have in it. The videogames at stake in this book reproduce a particular kind of American culture, one instantly recognizable precisely because it relates so effortlessly to such a common conception, imaginary as it may be.

The book's title, *Playing American*, originally emerged as one of those playful experiments common to game studies scholarship, in which the author uses a combination of game-related vocabulary and the core subject of their inquiry. Yet I soon realized that there was more than wordplay to it and that I had indeed found the thing that connected everything I found interesting in the videogames I studied. It immediately points to the imaginary work, the make-believe, involved in processes of cultural reproduction. There is a difference between 'being' American and 'playing' American and yet one appears impossible without the other.

Though originally unintended, the title immediately evokes cultural historian Philip J. Deloria's *Playing Indian*, a landmark work in American studies that traces the search for an original American identity from the pre-revolutionary period to the 1990s through "the practice of playing Indian" (7). "Throughout this history," he argues, "whenever white Americans have confronted crises of identity, some of them have inevitably turned to Indians" (156). The figure of the Indian served as a model of original, perceived Americanness at the same time as claiming this quality through the figure of the Indian came at the expense of the actual native peoples who had been living on the continent long before European colonists even knew it existed. As the American was created as a distinct identity through playing Indian, flesh-and-blood Native Americans had to be removed from white Americans' social reality. While the idea of the Indian and their claim to the land was necessary to imagine an independent and legitimate American identity, the reality of actual Native Americans, and especially the history of violent removal and genocide, needed to be suppressed. "Playing Indian," Deloria concludes, "offered Americans a national fantasy – identities built not around synthesis and transformation, but around unresolved dualities themselves" (185).

My book, unlike Deloria's, is not a work of Native American studies, nor do I intend to equate the practice described by Deloria with the one delineated here. The act of playing American, as it is elaborated in the following pages, cannot possibly fulfill the same function as the act of playing Indian. Nonetheless, it seems possible to take cues from Deloria's conclusion for this present volume. Though different in nature from playing Indian, playing American offers players of the videogames analyzed in the following chapters a transnational fantasy, perhaps one "around unresolved dualities," too. Eventually, the transnational fantasy of playing American, I argue, works to reproduce American culture.

This reproduction of American culture *qua* AAA videogames – those with top-tier production budgets (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 311) – exemplified by three popular franchises here, works along four axes: the transnational AAA videogame industry, the remediation of American popular culture, the production of game-specific versions of America, and the discursive repetition and variation of national self-descriptions evoked by such videogames. Not all of these operate simultaneously, and neither do all of them follow one after another in a regular order. They are different axes precisely in the sense that they account for different dimensions of the same phenomenon, which is better explained by addressing each axis in some detail. Doing so will also accentuate why the very ambiguity of the terms 'production' and especially 'reproduction' is in fact advantageous as it highlights just these different dimensions that play a role in the processes which sustain a culture, in this case American culture.

In this book, I operate on an understanding of culture as a system dependent on distinct practices, such as the continual narration of the culture from within (but also, perhaps to a lesser extent, from without). Here I adopt Frank Kelleter's amalgamation of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, which understands "culture as something that keeps *happening* – something that keeps ensuring the continuation of its own existence, enlisting for this purpose different players and products, ambitions and commitments, affiliations and identifications" (*Serial* 4). Elsewhere, Kelleter contends that "what we call culture is fundamentally dependent on the repetition and variation of narratives" ("From" 99), and one can extend this assertion to include non-narrative actions, such as those in virtual environments. Acts of narrative attribution and actions in simulated (game)worlds alike produce particular versions of the culture each time around – variations on previous iterations, if you will. In the process, the culture as such is reproduced; it reproduces itself. Media products such as videogames are central agents of this cultural reproductive process; artifacts like the *Grand Theft Auto* games are not only products of a specific culture and produce particular representations of that culture themselves, they also prompt other actors to act in ways that work to partly reproduce the culture, as I demon-

strate in chapter 2. This is one of the ways in which Karl Marx's insight that "every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction" still rings true today (711), even when considering videogames of the twenty-first century.

Studying closely the production, consumption, and reception of series like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, the circular but also simultaneous and always interdependent operation of reproduction and production of American culture comes sharply into view. As much as these videogames draw on, remediate, and imitate aspects or products of American culture, they also contribute to its ongoing existence in manifold ways, regardless of where or by whom they are produced (which, mind you, is not the same as arguing that where and by whom they were produced does not matter – it matters very much, as I elaborate later). In many ways, producing videogames like *Watch Dogs*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, getting involved in their gameworlds, and discussing them is tantamount to reproducing American culture, whether intentionally or inadvertently; this reproduction is, I contend, the central effect of playing American in these videogames.

While there are other videogames and franchises to which several of the points made throughout *Playing American* apply similarly, the selection of case studies and restriction to these three series issues from their particular combination of a number of factors: popularity/commercial success, thematic focus on distinctly 'American' genres and scenarios, transnational production, and prevalence of thematically specific ambient operations (as defined in chapter 1). The fact that two out of three franchises considered in this book have been developed by Rockstar Games is best explained by the developer's history and approach to its flagship series (as elaborated in chapter 2) and by the continuing success and impact of both *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption*. Both series combine the factors mentioned above in a uniquely pronounced way. This preference is, therefore, based on the particular nature of these franchises and not on Rockstar Games per se – the impact of the developer's evolution on the former notwithstanding – as Rockstar Games has many other videogames in its portfolio to which the criteria laid out here do not apply.

What is called "playing American" in this book encompasses processes of AAA videogame production, structures of videogame action, and reception practices, thus spanning the life of videogames from conception to consumption. On the surface level, players of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* – as well as countless other videogames – playact as distinctly American characters in distinctly American settings ranging from twenty-first-century metropoles to fictional renditions of the historic American West, regardless of where the players themselves come from or where they are located. Underneath these

apparent acts of virtual role-playing, there is an operational structure that aligns actions in these videogames, both by the player and the computer, with protocols, technologies, and ideologies that are in one way or another related to the United States and its society and cultures. This structure, in turn, runs on technology leading back to the United States even as its production, like that of AAA videogames themselves, is a thoroughly transnational enterprise. In the following pages, these different layers are tackled one after the other, from the ground up.

Since the origins of videogames in American military research have been investigated and discussed at length in numerous excellent works, from Claus Pias's seminal *Computer Spiel Welten* to the more recent *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* by John Wills, it is not necessary to rehash the story of these early beginnings in any detail here. What is more relevant to understanding the phenomenon of playing American, instead, is the tension between a widespread perception of current computational technology, particularly outside of (East) Asia, as dominated from within the United States – especially through the products and services of the so-called big five: Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Microsoft – and the much more distributed reality of manufacturing hardware, developing software, and hosting web services today. It is true that most of the leading providers of gaming platforms today, with the prominent exception of Nintendo, are based in the United States: Steam and Epic Games (the dominant distribution platforms for PC games); Microsoft with its Xbox consoles; even Sony Interactive Entertainment, responsible for the PlayStation consoles, which despite originating in and still belonging to a Japanese corporation is now based in California; and the App Store and Google Play for mobile games. Besides Nintendo, it seems that there are few options for playing videogames that do not involve engaging with American technology and services; playing videogames, in this sense, is playing American from the ground up.

The picture changes, however, once attention shifts away from the locations of head offices and toward the production processes of physical objects, in this case gaming hardware. Whereas the design and label may be American, most gaming devices – PCs, consoles, smartphones – are manufactured in East Asia. For instance, Taiwanese electronics manufacturing giant Foxconn, "the largest contract-based electronics manufacturer in the world" (George), has been responsible for (parts of) the production of the PlayStation 4, the Xbox One, the Nintendo Switch, various iPhones and iPads, and much more (George; Ashcraft). Even before Foxconn or other contractors put it all together, a number of raw materials, including rare earths, have to be extracted in different countries around the world and then shipped around the globe (Woodcock 35–36; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter xviii, 222–223), all to eventually end up in the hands of gamers around the world. "To say that digital games are deeply embedded in global capitalism," Nick Dyer-Witheford

and Greig de Peuter write, “is an understatement” (222). The setup of these production processes, involving a global “cyber-proletariat” (Woodcock 37), is instructive because it presents the phenomenon at the center of this book as transnational to the very core. Even gaming hardware, as it were, plays American, appearing as something that, technically, it is not.

Similarly, AAA videogame development today is a genuinely transnational enterprise. Publishers and developers are often based in several countries, usually concentrated in North America, Western Europe, and (South) East Asia, with the latter region constituting the largest share of the market (Jagoda and Malkowski, “Introduction” 9). “Interestingly,” Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski write, “many video game players in the United States likely have little sense that their nation does not, in fact, broadly dominate the market and culture of the medium, because video games’ national origins are often purposefully obscured” (“Introduction” 9). Yet this does not change the fact that products as transnational as AAA videogames can go a long way in reproducing perceived national cultures.

Concerning the question of cultural reproduction, both the ‘re-‘ and the ‘production’ sides of the equation are central. The production of culture is regularly simply production in its original sense of manufacturing consumable products, which fits with Marx’s ideas referenced before. The crucial question here is how it is possible that American culture is produced outside of the United States, especially when we are confronted with “a situation in which an American popular culture-type of modern culture is no longer necessarily American” (Fluck, “California” 231). As Kelleter emphasizes,

> we can justifiably ask how American media practices succeed to mark and market themselves as “American” at all. What, for instance, are the practical (meaning action-bound) consequences of perceiving a movie as an American movie, even if it was made, say, with Australian money by a European director who adapted an Asian source text? Furthermore, how does the plausibility of this perception, established against all odds, guide the movie’s relation to itself, to its audiences, and ultimately to the unlikely system of national self-description from which it draws and to which it contributes? (“There’s” 394–395)

The answer to this question can be found in the very process of cultural reproduction. In order to reproduce itself, a culture relies on material objects – ‘media’ would be another term – but these objects need not be the product of the culture itself, at least not in the sense of resulting from the people and territory with which the culture is associated. All they need to achieve is to make people from that culture act, and especially talk about that culture, in specific ways.

American culture has always had a transnational foundation, as “[t]he United States is perhaps the prototypical transnational state formation” (Shu and Pease, “Introduction” 1). This can be attributed both to its historical development and to the globalization of its popular culture, amounting partly to “a worldwide process

of self-Americanization" (Fluck, "California" 231), from the mid-twentieth century onward. Moreover, American culture, like any other culture, is not a direct translation of empirical historical realities into media forms but rather a perceived, if not outright imagined, formation that only exists through ongoing media representation, through the communicative practices sustained by it, and through "acts of cultural performance" (Bauridl and Wiegmink 161). American culture, in this sense, depends and draws on but also feeds back into a transnational cultural imaginary, an ever-changing set of shared beliefs, values, ideas, assumptions, stereotypes, practices, etc., which both forms the basis for cultural production and exists through it (cf. Bieger, Saldívar, and Voelz x-xi). Referencing the United States and American culture on a representational and formal level ties the videogames studied here to an intertextual web of meaning and to a set of experiences and assumptions relied on by audiences that inextricably link such media objects with American culture regardless of where, and by whom, they are produced.

The most apparent way in which videogames reproduce American culture is in their "*remediation*" of American popular culture (Bolter and Grusin 4), the global ubiquity of which is why this remediation is so easily achieved even in transnational projects. The virtual worlds considered here are never truly original. Instead, they are best viewed as remediations – and in this sense gamifications (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 112–113, cf. 263–267; cf. Bogost, "Why") – of existing narratives, images, and all kinds of cultural tropes with long histories in American culture, which is quite visible in all the videogames analyzed here. These videogames not only translate American locales and genres into videogames; more importantly, they turn them into worlds to be inhabited, experienced, and interacted with by the player. Many of the models *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* use as the building blocks for their own aesthetic visions have been American in the sense that they not only signify something we call 'American culture' but were also literally produced within the nation state of the United States. These remediations, then, are reproductions of American culture not only because every remediation is a reproduction of something else in a new media form (Bolter and Grusin 45), but also because they attempt (and arguably succeed) to create an aesthetic experience associated with American cultural production irrespective of their own geographical and cultural production contexts.

Concerning the structures of action in these remediations, it must be noted that I am not concerned here with questions of avatars, player-character relationships, or the effects of role-playing on players, neither in general terms nor in their player-specific and game-specific instantiations (cf. Burn, "Playing Roles"; cf. Burn, "Role-Playing; cf. Aldred). Rather than focus on what the act of playing American is doing for the actor, what matters in the context of this book is this kind of playacting's function for, and effect on, American culture at large. Playing

American also means acting in accordance with real-world logics and practices transposed to both the thematic and the procedural levels of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, as the respective chapters show. The distinction between real and virtual worlds, in this sense, is entirely artificial. From capital accumulation to casual surveillance to transfers of responsibility, replicating real-world logics and practices in gameplay reproduces American habits since the repetitive nature of videogame play consolidates the actions undertaken, which contributes to the sustainment of the culture to which they are linked.

The fantasies that matter here are the thematic roles one embodies when playing *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption*. Whether it is gangsters, hackers, or cowboys, players always role-play particular types with long histories of representation in American culture, particularly in literature, film, and television. What seems hackneyed at first glance deserves renewed attention once considered not as the end of a process but, rather, as the beginning. Instead of viewing this side of playing American as merely a "*remediation*" (Bolter and Grusin 4) of existing American tropes and types, one can also understand it as a starting point of something productive in its own right. I contend that one needs to consider the role-playing component of videogames like *Grand Theft Auto* less in its remediation and gamification of established American types and more in its productive quality. In other words, even though all of these videogames evidently remediate existing tropes, they always do more than that, as they also create new states of affairs, some examples of which are delineated throughout this book. Any instance of playacting as a particular kind of American in the videogames examined here also produces a version of 'the American' and, ultimately, constitutes a reproductive act; it reproduces something we call 'American,' which would otherwise cease to exist, as indicated earlier.

The American here is produced without recourse to actual American citizens living their daily lives in the reality of the twenty-first-century United States, even as millions of players engaging in these virtual worlds are Americans themselves. Just as Deloria's subjects play Indian without considering actual Native Americans, the American roles performed by players in the gameworlds studied here have little in common with real-world Americans; the latter are, indeed, pushed not only into the background but out of the picture. The American produced in the process, then, is an imaginary construct, feeding on an existing (trans)national imaginary but also feeding back into it; in the process, however, substantial work for American culture is performed.

More generally, the videogames studied here produce their own distinct versions of America. These draw on the media and works they remediate in the design of their component parts, but they create something original in doing so. Every gameworld considered in the following chapters presents a particular vi-

sion of America, expressed through the embedment of recognizable elements in distinctive procedural and narrative logics. *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* each show their own specific America even as these visions are inevitably informed by the genealogies of representations preceding them. *Grand Theft Auto* employs countless, often exaggerated stereotypes from and about American culture toward the end of spinning a system that ultimately operates under the dual logic of spectacle and accumulation, a cynical world of excess in which each and every entity is the butt of a joke as well as a resource from which to extract capital, all cloaked in the American gangster genre, which is not only immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with Hollywood films but which also conceals the fact that the operational logic of the underworld depicted is nothing but the operational logic of neoliberal capitalism, the purest form of which can perhaps be found in the United States. *Watch Dogs* centers on the mythical figure of the hacker, inherited from American literature and film, at the same time as it projects a world whose primary operation and axis of power is digital surveillance, a genuinely contemporary problem of the twenty-first century, depicting an America in which surveillance as well as its capitalization are the defining logics from which all other social, economic, and governing interactions follow. *Red Dead Redemption* brings the most American of all genres, the Western – and especially the cinematic Western – to bear on American life in the algorithmic age, casting an America that points to an easily recognizable imagined past at the same time as the database logic that organizes it is firmly anchored in the present, amounting to a retreat from history. As I argue throughout this book, the reproduction of American culture that ultimately takes place in all of this – the reproduction of American culture as such, that is – emerges from the videogames discussed here rather than the other way around. The gameworlds of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* themselves are sources for American culture to reproduce itself.

## Videogames at the Intersection of American Studies and Game Studies

Compared to other media and more established forms of culture – art, literature, film, television, and even comic books – videogames have been understudied by Americanists for the longest time. Nonetheless, research on videogames and American culture reaches back to the formative years of a distinct, visible, and somewhat robust field of game studies. Since the early 2000s – and even before then – videogame scholars, especially those who are from or work in North America, have regularly addressed issues central to American culture, from economic and technological

aspects to questions of identity and ideology. From Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins's *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* to Matthew Thomas Payne's *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11* and many others, game studies research has always shed light on salient issues in American culture and the ways they are treated by and incorporated in videogames. Nonetheless, research of this kind has had a hard time finding a prominent place in the field of American studies, if we understand the field as it is demarcated by associations, publications, and conferences devoted to the study of American cultures and societies. Despite more than three decades of substantial scholarship attending to central research interests of the field, work on videogames undertaken decidedly within frameworks of American studies has remained sporadic, fragmented, and scattered. Whereas scholars have long pursued literary studies as American studies or film studies as American studies, and whereas this has always found representation in conferences and publications devoted to American studies, the same has not been true for game studies, even as videogames have now been a feature of American culture, society, technology, economics, and politics for half a century. The reasons for this are manifold and arguably have a lot to do with cultural prestige, class distinction, generational divides, and the structure of the academic job market, even in a field that has been as welcoming, compared to other fields, to considerations of popular culture as American studies. "This state of affairs would feel less like a missed opportunity," Pöhlmann pointedly asserts, "if American Studies, with its disciplinary multiplicity, was not so ideally equipped for analyzing video games" ("Introduction" 2).

Nonetheless, things are beginning to change. Starting with a conference in 2018 in Munich, for example, the "collaborative interdisciplinary research initiative" Playing the Field marks the attempt to bring German American studies scholars interested in videogames together and provide this area of study with more visibility in the field ("Playing"). Two edited volumes showcase the range of innovative work at the American studies/game studies nexus growing out of this network of scholars: *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, edited by Sascha Pöhlmann, and *Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies*, edited by Dietmar Meinel. The initiative's website offers something like a mission statement:

> "Playing the Field" is a collaborative interdisciplinary research initiative started by German American Studies scholars in 2018. Its objective is to create a welcoming and informal environment that fosters academic conversations about video games in our field and beyond. Broadly speaking, we are interested in how the theories and methods of American Studies may be fruitfully brought to bear on video games as objects of research, and how in turn video games change these theories and methods. We pursue these questions together with other international scholars, scientists, and artists from various disciplines. ("Playing")

Similarly, both the *European Journal of American Studies* and *American Literature* have recently featured special issues dedicated specifically to productive intersections and cross-fertilizations between American studies and game studies. The former, edited by Mahshid Mayar and Stefan Schubert, is titled *Video Games and/in American Studies: Politics, Popular Culture, and Populism*, while the latter, edited by Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski, is titled *American Game Studies*. The titles speak for themselves as they double down on the need for work that is equally drawing on both fields and that synthesizes what one can bring to the other, whether theoretically, methodologically, or simply in terms of the central subject matter. In their introduction to *American Game Studies*, Jagoda and Malkowski stress that they "have sought to explore the contributions of American studies – its methods, its worldview – to the interdisciplinary constellation of game studies through essays that pull from both of these fields" (2). Mayar and Schubert run a similar approach while adding a specific topical focus, as their "issue suggests a particular framework in which the two areas can be most productively brought together, namely, the cross-fertilization between video games and the nexus of politics, popular culture, and populism" ("Joystick" 2). This kind of scholarly effort to productively bring together the theories, methods, and research interests of both American studies and game studies also constitutes the core motivation of this book.

In the following paragraphs, I sketch out the connections of *Playing American* to ongoing discussions in both American studies and game studies and, hence, situate its contributions within both fields. The chapters to follow each draw on their very own archives of research, drawn from fields far more numerous than the ones mentioned here, with a certain kind of digital media theory represented by the authors most prominently cited in all chapters present throughout. Since the individual works whose insights and concepts provide the basis for the ideas developed in this book are discussed more thoroughly at the points where they are utilized, the following remarks do not engage existing research in detail but rather map out a field of inquiry as represented by selected examples of scholarship in order to locate my research among the work that came before. It does not serve, therefore, as the theoretical foundation – which is subsequently built, bit by bit and chapter by chapter, throughout the entire book – but, rather, as the scholarly environment in which my work breathes and lives, in which its voice may be heard and answered in productive exchanges of ideas.

Located at the intersection of American studies and game studies, with a slant toward media studies more generally, *Playing American* builds on scholarship from all these fields and, in turn, attends to current issues of interest of each of them. What primarily connects these fields beyond their obvious thematic overlaps in this book is an investment in the factor of practice. This is to say that

American culture, videogames, and (digital) media in general are understood and hence treated as practice-based – concatenations of action either in progress or past, in the latter case leaving behind traces in the form of verbal accounts. As indicated before, American culture, like any other, depends on communicative actions that describe and thus circumscribe the culture, hence guaranteeing its continued existence. Videogames exist in the combination of a working machine – the computer that is the respective gaming device used in any particular instance – and an acting user, here called "player" (Galloway, *Gaming* 2–3). The same is true for digital media in general. Media (and mediation) are significant because of their practice(s): how they work, how they are used, how they act on the environments in which they find themselves, and, therefore, how they act in the world. Accordingly, a majority of the scholarship mapped out in the following emphasizes the factor of practice in questions of media and culture and, therefore, provides a foundation for understanding videogames as cultural actors in the complex commonly called American culture.

Concerning American studies, *Playing American* operates within the frameworks of two ongoing directions of research in the field: a conception and practice of American studies as media studies, including a focus on practices from production to reception and beyond, and the transnational turn, building on and extending an agenda of post-exceptional American studies. Videogames are indeed prime examples of many of the issues these lines of research are interested in and, therefore, turning to videogames proves instructive in illuminating several of their key concerns.

Turning to media studies – in the sense of putting media, mediality, mediation, and other related concepts, formations, and practices at the center of American studies research – entails foregrounding the problem of media, in the technical sense of the term. Hence, media specificity, the resulting practices, and their cultural implications need to be interrogated not only alongside, but rather before and as always underlying, any kind of content. Here Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that "the medium is the message" rings true indeed (7).

The heightened interest in media theory in German American studies is evidenced by a number of publications emerging from the circles and official publication channels of the German Association for American Studies over the past two decades (cf. Decker), some of which I discuss exemplarily here – exemplarily because they merely represent particularly concise and explicit formulations of this ongoing trend. The first case in point is Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein's edited volume aptly titled *American Studies as Media Studies* from 2008, which collects selected contributions that were first "delivered at the 53$^{rd}$ annual conference of the German Association of American Studies" (ix). In their introduction, Kelleter and Stein formulate two basic observations that can be considered the

foundation of the turn to media studies in American studies: "There is probably no other cultural formation whose existence has been linked as intensely to mediation and media revolutions as that of the United States . . . . So just as American history is inconceivable without modern media, the history of modern media cannot be told without the United States of America" (ix). Both points prove pertinent with regard to videogames, whose history begins in American (military) research facilities and whose rise to a massively popular and by now omnipresent entertainment medium is inseparably connected with the United States (cf. Jagoda and Malkowski, "Introduction" 2). In this book, I especially address the first point, as *Playing American* interrogates the role of selected open-world videogame franchises and their media-specific characteristics in sustaining the formation we call American culture.

Taking on a meta-perspective partly surveying said turn to media studies (and visual culture studies), Christof Decker's contribution to the forum section of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, titled "American Studies as Media and Visual Culture Studies: Observations on a Revitalized Research Tradition," is both an example of the turn itself and an effort to take stock of what it has achieved and which challenges lie ahead. Toward the end of his essay, Decker considers the unproductive flip side of a field dedicated to and partly justified by a perceived significance of America as something unique, even after the waning of the exceptionalist paradigm, and also, despite the transnational turn in the field, as inseparably connected to the territory and people of the United States of America: "One obvious consequence has been that most work on semiotics, narratology, cognitive and emotional impact, and on the reception of visual art forms and audiovisual media has been 'imported' from other disciplines, while little scholarship on these topics originating in the American Studies field is being 'exported'" (123). *Playing American* attends to Decker's call for "work on foundational aspects of media, how they work and create meaning" as it integrates foundational work in game studies (123), which has interrogated the form and function of videogames as a medium, into the question of "cultural work" in relation to American culture (Tompkins 200). Parts of this book furthermore consider not only the technological but also the industrial aspects behind the AAA videogames examined.

As part of an edited volume called *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas*, aimed at providing a state of the field through its selection of chapters, William Uricchio's "Things to Come in the American Studies-Media Studies Relationship" strikes a tone similar to Decker's. After mapping out longstanding overlaps, interconnections, and exchanges between American studies and media studies and then projecting a handful of potential future – and now present – directions of the former, Uricchio summarizes the central chance and challenge of a renewed or more thorough consideration of media as such in American studies:

> The single greatest change confronting us is acknowledging that media entail more than representation, and finding ways to harvest this excess. This excess, always there but far too long ignored, now has an urgency and promise that are obvious and unavoidable, and highly relevant for both American and Media Studies. (21)

Representation, it must be stressed, remains important and Americanists must not cease to critically study it. Nonetheless, examining and understanding the "excess" of media – in this case videogames – which, as we shall see, can take various forms, is a central objective of this book. It examines not only what is represented in the videogames analyzed, it also asks what the conditions for their existence are, which actions and practices they engender, and how they work on their cultural environment and leave traces in it.

The final example I would like to introduce here is Kelleter's response to Uricchio in the same volume, titled "'There's Something Happening Here': Digital Humanities and American Studies (A Response to William Uricchio)." This response makes an important contribution especially when Kelleter turns to methodology and the implications for American studies. First, he sets up his methodological intervention, in which he proposes an approach based on Bruno Latour's version of actor-network-theory (more on this later):

> [P]erhaps media studies have reached a point at which they can leave behind the whole partisan dichotomy of production versus reception with its manifold assumptions about competing intentions and strategies. At the very least, we can "reimagine" (to use William's words) the "old logics of production and consumption" if we think of cultural agency as something that is dispersed in a network made up not only of people and institutions but also of technologies, objects, forms, and their "affordances." For who or what is actually acting when a producer 'follows' an aesthetic decision she has made? How many former media receptions and productions are active in her choice? How many readings and writings – and how many so-called practical constraints of objects and forms that really guide the things we do – are present in a single productive decision? Indeed, is their presence not an active one? Effective in any such personal or corporate aesthetic choice, as in its consequences, are always other agencies, some far removed from the persons acting, some not necessarily known to them, some not even human. ("There's" 392–393)

Here Kelleter not only shifts the focus to those media aspects Uricchio terms "excess," he also dissolves longstanding dichotomies prevalent in both media studies and American studies by calling attention to something shared by both fields and that, in fact, proves decisive to them: action. Following Kelleter's thought, all those other aspects of media besides the representational (which has long been privileged in American studies), such as technology and practice, become equally important in the study of culture. In this spirit, *Playing American* also considers those aspects of videogames that often remain hidden when playing them and (perhaps unintentionally) neglected when analyzing them, such as technological

affordances of gaming devices, the structural (rather than visual or narrative) logics of gamic representations, or the conditions of production necessary to make a AAA videogame, and how all of them are always connected.

Doubling down on the shift to action (and, consequently, agency) as the major currency of both media and culture, Kelleter's remarks on the field of American studies and its potential research trajectories draw out the practical implications of this shift and connect it, perhaps inadvertently, to the transnational turn, though the latter, as we shall see, takes on a new meaning here. After introducing the term "self-descriptions," drawn from Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems (cf. Luhmann 866–1149), in order to apply the proposed theoretical and methodological shift to the study of culture, which in Kelleter's understanding depends on precisely these self-descriptions to exist, and after underscoring that "the power of national self-descriptions is particularly strong in the United States" ("There's" 394), he raises a fundamental problem already mentioned, one that challenges assumptions and practices that have previously guided much scholarship in American studies: How – that is, through which concrete actions – do cultural products of international and transnational collaborations manage to end up appearing 'American,' self-identifying as 'American,' and being perceived as such, and how does this identification then work on the culture to which the object is related ("There's" 394–395)? Here, Kelleter raises questions of mediality, action, and the transnational dealings of national cultures, all of which are addressed in this book. The videogames studied here are prime examples of the kind of media production Kelleter delineates in the cited passage. Each case study, therefore, attends to the question of how videogames as media, the practices from which they emerge as well as which they engender, and their condition as transnationally produced and internationally consumed mass market entertainment products relate to the cultural work of the franchises examined here within a larger formation called American culture. *Playing American* thus adds to and continues the conversation around American studies, media studies, and culture sketched out above, while also bringing those same questions to the field of game studies, where they have likewise remained understudied.

It is only a small step from Kelleter's specific theoretical questions and practical suggestions to a larger trend in American studies in the twenty-first century. The so-called transnational turn in the early 2000s consisted of a heightened interest in those aspects of America that exceed the borders of the US-American nation state, such as a concentration on interdependencies between American imperialism dominating the global economic order and structural discrimination in the United States, consideration of formerly neglected contexts from which American cultural productions emerged, intercultural exchanges and the mutual effects of different cultures on each other, and a new focus on the mobilities of

people and texts (cf. Pease; cf. Morgan, Hornung, and Tatsumi). Shelley Fisher Fishkin has described the turn as consisting of "three rough, interrelated categories," which she calls "*broadening the frame*," "*cross-fertilization*," and "*renewed attention to travel and to how texts travel*" ("Mapping" 31). Fishkin's 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association with the title "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies" is often cited as the watershed moment that turned disparate efforts by individual scholars into a programmatic agenda and pressing challenge as well as a chance for the field at large. After drawing attention to previous shifts in the field, often pointed out by previous ASA presidents in their addresses, Fishkin raises the issue of transnationalism in American studies: "Today another generative question in the spirit of those others is becoming increasingly salient: What would the field of American studies look like if the transnational rather than the national were at its center – as it is already for many scholars in this room?" ("Crossroads" 21). After all, she concludes, "[t]he United States is and has always been a transnational crossroads of cultures. And that crossroads of cultures that we refer to as 'American culture' has itself generated a host of other crossroads of cultures as it has crossed borders" ("Crossroads" 43). What amounted to a perceived turn then is by now an established conceptual grounding and practice in the field.

The various research trajectories this transnational turn has emerged from and, in turn, generated are far too numerous to recall here, and many do not pertain directly to the topic at stake in this book. It is, however, worthwhile to return once more to Fishkin's three categories in combination with her assertion of the "transnational crossroads of cultures" that is American culture. This is Fishkin's description of the categories:

> I will call the first category *broadening the frame*, integrating U.S. history and literature into broader historical contexts and comparative frameworks, and integrating multiple national histories and literatures with one another more fully. The second category involves work exploring the *cross-fertilization* of cultures, particularly the ways in which literature and pop culture from different locations influence and shape each other. The third category involves *renewed attention to travel and to how texts travel* and what we learn about different cultures in the process. ("Mapping" 31)

I quote Fishkin's three categories here because they encapsulate both how AAA videogames behave as transnational cultural actors and how I consider them as American culture beyond national borders. AAA Videogames are, in fact, a form of popular culture that epitomizes the transnational much more than literature or even film because the industry and market have long been organized across the globe in such a way that the structures behind their production, distribution, and reception are transnational by default, so that the medium – regional gaming cultures and multitudes of small-scale, independent developers around the world

notwithstanding – truly embodies the transnational. The analysis of AAA videogames therefore demands a broadening of the frame as these are videogames produced and played all around the globe, which results in a mutual exchange between different cultures independent of any particular game's theming or production context. Likewise, as entertainment products that often remediate existing cultural content, any close examination of AAA videogames will invariably produce insights that attest to the influence that source materials from other cultures have on any given release, which in turn shapes popular culture globally. Finally, saying that these videogame "*texts travel*," as Fishkin phrased it, is a vast understatement in a field where AAA videogames are not only produced for a global audience from the get-go and often released simultaneously in different regions of the world, but are also to a considerable and constantly growing extent distributed digitally on globally accessible distribution platforms like Steam or the PlayStation Store. In this way, these texts do not travel so much as they simply appear everywhere at once. In light of these considerations, *Playing American* not only directly contributes to this now firmly established practice in American studies, but it also showcases why videogames demand more serious attention from Americanists. In the context of the transnational turn, this book thus both continues a tradition and intervenes in it by shifting the view to a long-neglected form of culture that proves immensely instructive in illuminating the transnational dimensions of American culture and how it reproduces itself (cf. Jagoda and Malkowski, "Introduction" 8–9). If thinking nationally and transnationally is vital to an analysis of what Americans are involved in" (J. Pfister 31), the same is true for the analysis of the kinds of videogames studied here.

In the context of game studies, the second major affiliation of my work, this book fits within a larger body of research that explicitly considers the interplay between videogames and culture at large and in more general terms. Examples of this kind of research – drawing on disciplines like sociology, history, and cultural studies – include Graeme Kirkpatrick's *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary*, Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford's *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*, Matthew Thomas Payne and Nina B. Huntemann's edited collection *How to Play Video Games*, and the already mentioned *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture* by John Wills. Wills's monograph in particular is perhaps the most comprehensive and thorough synthesis of American studies and game studies to date.[4] Tracing both the history

**4** Though only marginally relevant to the focus of this book, Phillip Penix-Tadsen's *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* demands to be mentioned here, as its focus on the Americas south of the United States provides a necessary counterweight to the already mentioned dominance of US-centric work in American studies concerning the field of videogames.

of videogames in the United States and the incorporation of videogames into American culture over time through attentive readings of individual titles against their historical context, Wills produces a dense web of instances that showcase how American culture and videogames have from the beginning been engaged in a mutually effective exchange that continues to leave its mark on both. This book follows in the footsteps of Wills, but it remains much more limited in scope. This allows me, however, to treat my case studies as well as the central question of playing American – that is, concrete manifestations of the reproduction of American culture – with more detail and to better attend to the concrete operations underlying the phenomenon examined here. If *Gamer Nation* is something akin to the macro-level story of videogames and American culture, *Playing American* is its micro-level complement.

As this book moves beyond purely formalist and ontological approaches void of considerations of the factors of culture and politics at the same time as it avoids falling into the trap of unfounded claims and wholesale condemnations, *Playing American* also joins a growing body of work that can be subsumed under the label of critical game studies, invested in advancing a critical discourse on videogames as one of the dominant forms of digital popular culture. Despite its shunning of older formalist approaches that have tended to view videogames as somehow outside of the cultural or the political, or that have discounted representational questions in favor of pure form or ontology, this book nevertheless also addresses the problem of form. It does, however, employ a formalism attuned to the spheres of culture and politics, exploring questions of form in service of uncovering their cultural implications.

Critical game studies, much of which aims to bring the tools of cultural studies to the study of videogames, examines videogames in their entanglements in larger cultural struggles, focusing on questions regarding power differentials, ideology, identity, representation, economics, and similar concerns. Outstanding examples of this kind of work include Alexander R. Galloway's seminal monograph *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, which operates at the intersections of game studies, digital media studies, and critical theory; Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* and Jamie Woodcock's *Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle*, both of which expose videogames' intimate conjunction with global capitalist structures and the ugly underbelly of one of the largest and fastest-growing entertainment industries in the world; Alenda Y. Chang's *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*, which mounts a multilayered framework for ecocritical considerations of videogames in both their environmental effects and their potentials to aid environmental causes by way of simulation; Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, which provides a methodologically

and theoretically rich investigation into questions of representation with regard to marginalized communities in videogames; Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm's edited volume *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, which collects diverse critical perspectives on representations of various identities in videogames; Soraya Murray's *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, which applies a cultural studies-informed visual culture lens to popular videogames in order to uncover their entanglements in long-standing ideological formations and power struggles, specifically in the context of American culture; Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard's edited volume *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice*, which gathers contributions addressing the manifold ways in which oppression, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice are reproduced by videogames as well as pondering how the medium may instead become a tool to combat these practices; and many other books and individual chapters and essays. Especially Galloway's and Murray's work are central to my own thinking about videogames, and both are exemplary for two dominant ways of looking at videogames that both inform the arguments advanced in this book, one focusing on action and the other on representation; importantly, both Galloway and Murray concentrate on one without discarding the other. Both deserve a few words here, however briefly, before their work is engaged more substantially in the following chapters.

Galloway, whose *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* has since become an indispensable part of the game studies canon, is one of the scholars whose work early on emphasized both the computational and the cultural aspects of videogames, at a time when particularly the so-called ludologists' focus on the game-like elements of the medium had grown quite influential in the field (cf. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 221–224). Considering videogames to be "*algorithmic cultural objects*" centers the informatic in his approach (Galloway, *Gaming* 6), which is something not taken over too explicitly in my own practice but that nonetheless undergirds the approach taken in this book. Before they are anything else, videogames "are software systems" (Galloway, *Gaming* 6), a fact that must always be considered, even if only implicitly. Galloway's most influential and lasting contribution is his conceptualization of videogames in terms of action, which is far more useful than the previous emphasis on game rules and play while simultaneously encompassing it. "If photographs are images, and films are moving images," Galloway explains,

> then *video games are actions*. Let this be word one for video game theory. Without action, games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book. Without the active participation of players and machines, video games exist only as static computer code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed; they exist when enacted. (*Gaming* 2)

For him, then, videogames are "an *action-based* medium" (*Gaming* 3). There will be more to say about Galloway's work later, specifically his critical project revolving around his Deleuzian concept of the "control allegory," which contends that "[v]ideo games are allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatic control" (*Gaming* 99, 106). But for now, let it suffice to point out that my own understanding of videogames and their cultural work also puts action, in its various figurations, center stage. Action is key to both meaning-production in videogames and to their function in culture at large, which is why each of my analyses of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* puts a special focus on the things done in, by, and around videogames and what all of these have to do with culture.

Before I turn to Murray, two other figures whose thinking strongly informs this book demand mentioning, not least because their work forms a bridge between Galloway's and Murray's. The first is Ian Bogost. Bogost begins his influential book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* with a simple statement that already encapsulates his model of the medium: "Videogames are an expressive medium. They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them" (vii). Arguing that videogames' "core representational mode" is "procedurality," Bogost explains:

> I call this new form *procedural rhetoric*, the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures. This type of persuasion is tied to the core affordances of the computer: computers run processes, they execute calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulations. (*Persuasive* ix)

The significance of this "new type of persuasive and expressive practice" (Bogost, *Persuasive* 2), which remains only implicit in Galloway's conceptualization of action, is that procedures – and the action resulting from their execution – are representative. In other words, an action in a videogame always means more than itself; it also represents something that exceeds the action as such, even though both may remain closely aligned.

The second relevant scholar here, whose work promotes a related argument, is Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Wardrip-Fruin speaks of "*expressive processing*," which denotes both the deliberate authoring of "rules for system behavior" and "what processes express in their design – which may not be visible to audiences" (*Expressive* 3). He argues that "digital media's processes . . . can be seen as 'operationalized' models of . . . [their] subjects" (*Expressive* 3), which is only validated by the conclusions drawn in this book. According to Wardrip-Fruin, videogames' agency in culture ultimately arises from their "*operational logics*" (*How* xxi). This coinage encompasses both the functioning of videogames on the level of software algorithms and the way

they represent the world and how we make sense of them. "*Operational logics*," he writes, "is a term for foundational elements that do cultural work, that structure our understanding, and that do so in part through how they function computationally" (*How* 9). Structure and its constituents, whether informatic or cultural, then, are decisive in producing meaning and carrying cultural agency. It is in this spirit of considering the procedural and operational as expressive from the computational level, through the representational level, and to the cultural level that videogame actions are at the center of my own understanding of videogames and their cultural work.

Bogost's and Wardrip-Fruin's arguments immediately testify to the commensurability of action and representation as analytic foci in game studies. This is further supported by Murray's work, which is invested in the politics of representation in videogames, emphasizing the visual but not discarding action. In her book *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, Murray explains: "While I also agree with Galloway that action is key to the discussion, and game worlds matter, this should not displace the centrality of representation. Hence I refer to games as *playable representations*, as a way of acknowledging the dual elements of action and representation at work in the visual culture of games" (25). Like Bogost's procedural rhetoric and Wardrip-Fruin's operational logics, Murray's idea of playable representations – drawing, in fact, partly on Wardrip-Fruin – both enables and urges us to consider the procedural and the representational together since they are intimately entangled in videogames. Her work is central to the ideas developed in this book in another dimension as well: its emphasis on culture, politics, and how both are related to (playable) representation. Arguing against purely formalist approaches to videogames, she asserts that "[g]ames are not isolated formations, fundamentally separated from culture and its dominant ideologies" (*On* 39). In fact, she writes,

> I would like to underscore that I operate from the base assumption that *all* games engage in a politics of identity, not just some of them. It should be understood that the perceived neutrality of games, even those that do not purport to deal with issues of identity, traffic in the assumption of a perceived 'universalism' or 'neutrality' that is fictive. It has never been the case that there was a politically neutral or a raceless form of games representation. (Murray, *On* 40)

While Murray is mainly concerned with questions of identity in her work, something that is also considered in this book but not put at the center, I too contend that all videogames have political implications and that these are crucial factors in their cultural work. Each of the following chapters attends to this problem. *Playing American* aspires, therefore, to satisfy Murray's call for a cultural studies of videogames, which she poses by way of answering a question in her introduc-

tion: "Is the 'culture' in games culture the 'culture' in cultural studies? The answer to that question is both yes and no. No: it is not conceived of in this way; but Yes: in fact they are one and the same, and we should begin to fully think of them as such" (*On* 42). Videogames are culture, but not only that, as I demonstrate in this book: culture (in this case American culture) also persists, in part, because of videogames and their actions.

## Chapter Plan

Three case studies of prominent AAA open-world videogame franchises (later called ambioperative gameworlds) structure this book's inquiry into the reproduction of American culture through acts of playing American in videogames: Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto*, Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs*, and Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption*. These case studies are preceded by a consideration of form and an elaboration of a specific analytic focus for the kinds of videogames studied here.

Chapter 1 begins from the lack of convincing, in-depth theoretical considerations of the open-world form so popular in contemporary videogames. Critiquing the terminology commonly used in reference to this form and moving beyond the dominant foci on space and goal-oriented ludic structures, the chapter shifts attention to seemingly subordinate environmental procedures, here referred to as 'ambient operations.' Identifying these operations as the constituent and defining feature of the form at stake here, the chapter delineates why an understanding of ambient operations is central to understanding the instances of playing American in the respective videogames and, subsequently, to tracing their cultural work. At the same time, the chapter emphasizes that ambient operations must not become the sole focus of analysis and may, in fact, temporarily defer to other focal points before completing the picture. The term 'ambioperative gameworld' is then introduced in order to mark the videogames examined in this book as a subset of open-world videogames. The chapter ends with a preliminary discussion of the inherent relationship between form and culture, in this case ambient operations, ambioperative gameworlds, and American culture – as well as, by extension, American studies – particularly in the context of a persisting, global regime of neoliberalism. The theoretical considerations of form laid out in this chapter inform the analyses in the following case studies in multifarious ways.

Chapter 2 considers Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto* as an actor-network reproductive of American culture, focusing less on the contents of the videogames themselves and more on the communicative actions they set in motion. The agencies of American culture, especially American popular culture, are traced from *Grand Theft Auto*'s production and its origins in the United Kingdom to its reception

in North America. By charting the work of these agencies, the chapter demonstrates how American culture acts on, in, and through the *Grand Theft Auto* series and in doing so reproduces aspects of American culture not only in but especially beyond the individual titles themselves. These aspects are described as three matters of concern: a shifting public discourse around videogames in the United States; dealings in social reality, especially structures and effects of racism and neoliberal capitalism; and the mythifying mediation of iconic American metropoles. The chapter ultimately describes acts of playing American from the actual to the virtual and from production to reception, amounting to the most comprehensive portrayal of the phenomenon with regard to a single videogame series.

Chapter 3 analyzes Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* series in the context of American commercial and state surveillance regimes in order to illuminate the ways in which these videogames reproduce common tropes of the public discourse surrounding contemporary surveillance practices in both representation and action. The chapter demonstrates how the self-proclaimed critical edge of *Watch Dogs* is undermined and even reversed by the structure of gameplay as guided by the gameworlds' ambient operations. After this general consideration of the representation as well as replication of American surveillance practices, the chapter takes a closer look at the specifically racialized forms of both the surveillance regime and the discourse surrounding it and how the *Watch Dogs* videogames reproduce both in representation and action. It is argued that the games thus contribute to a universalization common in discussions of contemporary surveillance, which works to conceal both the historical and the ongoing and potentially intensifying unequal affliction of people of color by American surveillance, particularly in an age of algorithmic surveillance, pattern recognition, and predictive policing. In their reproduction of the operational logics of surveillance in the United States, both the videogames and the player are playing American, which helps sustain such practices in the real world even when their discriminatory nature becomes increasingly apparent.

Chapter 4 argues that the cultural work of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* series resides in its reconfiguration of the quintessential American genre, the Western, in the form of a database. This 'database Western' produces a distinct politics that emerges from both this reconfiguration of the form and from the conditions of its production. As *Red Dead Redemption* reorganizes the Western in accordance with the dominant symbolic form of the computer age, its constituent elements are decontextualized in such a way as to produce a pseudo-apolitical and ostensibly neutral Western experience. This reconfiguration, however, results in a withdrawal from history, a disavowal of politics, and a transfer of responsibility to the player. The chapter furthermore shows how the very existence of the database Western as epitomized by *Red Dead Redemption* and the ambio-

perative gameworld that functions as its interface depend on exploitative work practices and neocolonial divisions of labor in the videogame industry, which are emblematic of a globally operating, neoliberal capitalism whose focal point is the United States. This final case study once more shows the transnational dimension of playing American in the production process of the database Western while also drawing attention to the performative aspects of playing American in a Western world that allows for random access to select generic tropes, which dehistoricizes the genre and its political implications, thus removing the player from American history even in the face of an increasing verisimilitude in *Red Dead Redemption*'s historical gameworlds.

The conclusion ultimately draws together the different strands of playing American delineated throughout the analytical chapters once more and provides an outlook for the work that may follow this book and build on its insights. *Playing American* aspires to be a model for future work on videogames in American studies, showcasing one template of what American studies as critical game studies can look like in practice. Each of the approaches applied to the case studies attends to the media specificity of videogames at the same time as it produces insights relevant to the role these videogames play in American culture and beyond. *Playing American* resorts neither to a formalism void of considerations of cultural inflection and politics nor to a view of cultural objects as purely reflective, and especially not one privileging narrative and visuals over other carriers of meaning. The following chapters explore the mutual relationship between form and culture with a focus on action, in the sense of things done with, by, to, and around ambioperative gameworlds. These worlds are playing American, we are playing American in them, and our engagement with them is simultaneously virtual and real, ludic and serious. The issue of playing American in these videogames ultimately presents itself as tantamount to the question of American culture in the twenty-first century.

# 1 Ambient Operations: An Analytic Focus for the Study of Open-World Videogames

The videogames examined in this book are commonly referred to as open-world games since they grant players a relatively high degree of freedom of movement across gameworlds that are often accessible in their entirety, or at least large sections thereof, early in a game. The term 'open-world game,' as I briefly elaborate below, is itself of little analytic value. The way in which these videogames organize gameplay, however, alternating between scripted structures and free play, exposes the player to the gameworld in a different manner than more confined or sequential spatial designs do. Not only allowing but indeed inspiring the player to drift, to dwell, and to relate to the gameworld in noninstrumental ways accentuates the worldness of the gamespace, which casts it as an active environment rather than a passive stage for player action. The background, as it were, is foregrounded in these videogames. Because of this emphasis on the environment – rather than narrative forms or ludic incentives, which nonetheless remain coupled to this environment – the gameworld's 'ambient operations,' as I call them, demand special attention in analyzing the cultural work of the videogames studied here.

In this chapter, I delineate the concept of ambient operations and elaborate how it fulfills two analytic functions: serving to distinguish the type of videogame discussed here from the diverse group of open-world games at large and filling the lacuna left between critical approaches focused on narrative, audiovisual presentation, and ludic design. A brief critique of the popular terminology used to categorize the videogames concerned here is followed by a definition of ambient operations, which then serves to demarcate a subset of open-world videogames that can be called ambioperative gameworlds. Finally, the last section lays out the connection between ambient operations and neoliberalism as a central research interest of American studies.

## 1.1 On Open Worlds and Sandboxes: A Brief Critique of Popular Terminology

The first question that arises here is: What is an open-world game? The term is used frequently in academic as well as popular discourse and the games generally associated with it include many popular, critically acclaimed, and commercially successful titles of the past two or three decades: action games from *Grand Theft Auto III* to *Cyberpunk 2077*; role-playing games (RPGs) from *Gothic* to *Fallout 4*;


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racing games from *Crazy Taxi* to *Need for Speed*;[5] even walking simulators like *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* and sports games like *Tony Hawk's Project 8*. This list already indicates that many different gameplay experiences can take place in open gameworlds, to the extent that the label 'open-world' sometimes seems to be the only thing some of these videogames have in common. Additional complications arise as another term is often applied synonymously: sandbox games. Both 'open-world game' and 'sandbox game' as terms usually remain poorly defined, if they are defined at all. Some of the definitions that do exist are not particularly useful at all, especially those like Mark B. Salter's – admittedly not a specialist in game studies – who describes "sandbox games" as those in which "players can make what experience they want out of the material in the game" (360). This definition indeed fits those videogames most commonly associated with open worlds. Unfortunately, however, it also fits almost every other game as well. According to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, the design of gameplay is, by definition, "second-order design," meaning that one can only cue player behavior through rules but never completely determine it (168), so that every game is marked by a "*space of possibility*," which "is the space of all possible actions that might take place in a game, the space of all possible meanings which can emerge from a game design" (67). Even in a rather simple and abstract game like *Tetris*, players can easily create their own experiences through the various ways in which they may engage with the game system; for example, a player could make the game more challenging by only placing particular tetrominoes in certain areas of the field or by only beginning to clear lines after she has first produced a particular pattern using the stacked blocks.

The mere ability to create player-specific experiences, then, cannot be the difference between open-world games and others. A way to somewhat redeem the argument would be to say that a distinctive quality of open-world games is that they considerably increase the possibilities for gamic experiences. Being able to choose which areas to explore by which means, which quests to complete in which order, which non-player characters (short: NPCs) to interact with in which form, and which possible choices to neglect, these all multiply the possibilities for gameplay compared to more constrained designs that structure movement, challenges, and action more strictly. One (hardly radical) insight to take from this discussion, then, is that open-world games, by design, provide a significantly larger space of possibility in comparison to other videogame forms. The trademark of

5 *Need for Speed* here refers to the 2015 reboot of the franchise, not the 1994 original. Several installments of the series feature open gameworlds.

open-world games, therefore, is a difference in degree rather than categorical quality.

Another complication arises from the application of the term 'sandbox games' to open-world games in general. Matthew Weise's short contribution to Henry Jenkins's blog, titled "The Future of Sandbox Gaming," is a good example for this. Weise's text is a response to a review of the first *Assassin's Creed* that uses the term sandbox to comment on the game's open-world design yet never defines what it means by it. He then writes that "he has used the term sandbox to refer to any game world – regardless of size and scope – that offers free-roaming, open-ended gameplay." Here we move from an outright lack of definition to a blanket definition. One has to wonder what use the term 'sandbox' has if it is simply coterminous with open-world gameplay. As a metaphor, the sandbox signifies two decisive aspects: the ability to play freely without any preconfigured processual limitations within the defined space and the ability to mold the shape of the space itself, the second of which is often neglected. The metaphor itself, then, is much more defined than its common application. The problem is that there are not many games that it applies to outside of the construction and management simulation genre, the most prominent being *Minecraft*, whose very concept relies on a creative and constructive engagement with a world-to-be-built rather than merely a world-to-play-in, as other open-world games employ it.

The pervasiveness of the conflation of 'sandbox' with 'open-world' is all the more puzzling as most players seem to be perfectly capable of distinguishing between the two. The comments section under a piece titled "6 Amazing, Open World Sandbox Games that Aren't *Grand Theft Auto*" on the blog *We Got This Covered*, for example, is rife with posts like this one by "Picky Eater," who does not hide their frustration:

> My god. How many more articles am I going to have to sift through of people confusing sandbox with open world? Sandbox games are ones where you shape/create the world around you. Open world is freedom of choice coupled with free roaming. They are not the same thing nor were any of this [sic] games actually anything close to being a sandbox game. An example of a sandbox game is Minecraft or Terraria. (Carriero)

It seems as if researchers are well-advised to pay good attention to such 'lay' accounts. It is time to reserve the category 'sandbox game' exclusively for construction and management simulations and those videogames that share some of the characteristics of *Minecraft*, then, and abandon its use as a synonym for 'open-world game' (cf. Zomers). More importantly, under this narrow definition *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* cannot productively be considered sandbox games.

What, then, is an open-world game? It is a videogame that organizes its gamespace as a single, entirely traversable contiguous space, often vast in its dimensions, which frequently comes with a high degree of freedom for player action. Usually, either from the beginning or after a certain point in the game, the whole gamespace can be explored without any formal constraints – though there may still be contingent constraints, like powerful NPC opponents hindering inexperienced players or weak player characters in their explorations of certain areas (cf. Aarseth, "From" 10). Such a form naturally has different affordances than, for example, a level-based design, which organizes the gamespace into several smaller, discrete units, access to which depends on the completion of particular level-dependent goals.

Although sometimes called a genre of videogames, this classification of open-world games is somewhat misleading. In one of the most recent and most elaborate attempts to theorize open-world videogames from the perspectives of space and time, distilled in the concepts of "the *world-shaped hall*" and "the *open-world chronotope*," Marc Bonner contends that open gameworlds are "not a genre but a mode of staging a media-specific spatiotemporal continuum, a worldliness only possible in open world games independent from 'genre settings'" ("World-Shaped" 92). Bonner's assessment is spot on; as videogames are an "*action-based* medium" (Galloway 3), generic classification commonly draws on the dominant play actions of a game rather than its spatial, visual, or narrative arrangement (Wolf, "Genre" 114–116; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 52–58). Rather than a mode, however, I conceive of open-world videogames as a *form*. On the one hand, open gameworlds are a form in the sense that they can accommodate various genres, that is, various structures of player action and their resulting patterns of gameplay. On the other hand, these worlds are a form because they actively shape such structures and patterns. Conceptualizing open gameworlds as a form, then, draws attention to the structuring function of gamespace, which goes beyond a mere staging of space and time in videogames.

If primarily defined by its open organization of space, open-world games have a long history that reaches back all the way to early text adventures, such as Will Crowther's *Colossal Cave Adventure* from 1977, in which most of the gameworld was accessible throughout the entire game (Moss), given one had acquired the necessary in-game means to proceed through otherwise blocked passages. This presupposes a definition of an open world as one that extends over more than one screen and thus includes the factor of size in the definition; otherwise, even *Pac-Man*, with its "wraparound space" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 77, cf. Wolf, "Space" 56–57), would technically be an open-world game, since there are no restrictions concerning which parts of the gameworld can be visited at any time. As graphically represented worlds became more widespread in the 1980s, vast open spatial structures persisted, perhaps most famously in *Elite*'s (1984) simulation of space flights and in the overworld structure of Japanese RPGs like *Final Fantasy* (1986). For a

long time, lasting well into the 1990s, open gameworlds could most commonly be found in RPGs rather than other genres. The organization of gamespace is one of the key factors defining a videogame's gameplay (cf. Salen and Zimmerman 394–396; cf. Aarseth, "Allegories" 47; cf. Juul 188–189; cf. Wolf, "Space" 53), and the exploration encouraged by an open world arguably resonates well with the focus on character development and the quest structure that organize both gameplay and narrative in most RPGs. Restricted spatial structures, on the other hand, more easily align with game designs that privilege puzzles, narrative suspense, or fast-paced action. As other genres later took on the open-world form more frequently, the structuring of gameplay in the form of quests was often adopted, such as in those videogames examined in this book, all of which privilege action while also including rudimentary RPG elements.

Besides space, another aspect often invoked to describe open-world games is narrative structure. These videogames are frequently characterized as being 'open-ended' – although some texts, like the Weise piece cited before, appear to relate the term to gameplay rather than narrative. Many open-world games do not end when their scripted narratives end; that is, once the game's story has reached its climax and conclusion, and is no longer advanced by any gameplay, players are still able to act in the gameworld in various ways, for example by solving side quests, interacting with the world's inhabitants, or simply exploring its landscapes. Yet open-world games and open-ended games are not necessarily the same thing, which further devalues the use of these terms as long as they are commonly employed as synonyms. Open-world videogames can be over when their scripted narratives have arrived at a conclusion, as in the *Gothic* series of RPGs, and open-ended videogames can feature worlds that are not open, such as the metafictional walking simulator *The Stanley Parable*.

Too general as a descriptor and too blunt as a tool, the question arises whether the terminology discussed above has much analytic value in producing new insights into the kinds of videogames studied in this book, especially when the inquiry aims to elucidate their implication in the reproduction of American culture. All of them are doubtlessly open-ended open-world games. Yet if any of these videogames stand out among the much larger set of open-world games, if any of them are special – that is, if any of them perform noteworthy cultural work toward that which we call American culture – the reason must be located beyond their open worlds as such, just as it must be located beyond their narratives, characters, and themes alone. One must look, I argue, at the gameworld's ambient operations instead.

## 1.2 From Ambient Operations to Ambioperative Gameworlds

My concept of ambient operations combines two arguments on videogame operations proposed by Galloway and Bogost to address a common feature of the kind of open-world videogames studied in this book. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway addresses the phenomenon that some gameworlds operate even when there is no player input, that is, when the player neither pauses the game nor acts in the gameworld. He calls this an "*ambience act*" and elaborates:

> Things continue to change when caught in an ambience act, but nothing changes that is of any importance. No stopwatch runs down. No scores are lost. If the passage of time means anything at all, then the game is not in an ambient state. It rains. The sun goes down, then it comes up. Trees stir. These acts are a type of perpetual happening, a living tableau. (*Gaming* 10)

This description draws attention to the fact that gameworlds can be more than mere backdrops for gameplay; they are active environments that function, to a large degree, independently of the player (cf. Chang, "Games" 58). Ambience acts are one example of what Galloway calls "*diegetic machine acts*," which comprise any action that happens within the fictional world of the game and that is carried out autonomously by the computer (*Gaming* 12). A random shootout between the police and some gangsters in *GTA V* is one example for this; a passerby who recognizes the player-character and calls the police in *WD* is another. As the following chapters show, these diegetic machine acts are an essential factor in playing American since they are an important device through which the videogames analyzed in this book produce cultural resonances and, hence, generate meaningful experiences. Galloway is wrong in asserting that "nothing changes that is of any importance" – I will return to this point in a moment – but his conceptualization of the gameworld as active and autonomous is a key insight.

The concept of the ambience act describes environmental actions in videogames as a somewhat holistic phenomenon, which certainly plays an important part in the creation of a gameworld's atmosphere (cf. Böhme 21–48), and the concept has been taken up by other scholars in a similar way. One application of Galloway's concept in this holistic sense can be found, for example, in Felix Zimmermann and Christian Huberts's article "From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre." Zimmermann and Huberts proceed from Galloway's ambience act to delineate a conception of the genre of the 'ambience action game' as an alternative to the popular term 'walking simulator,' while not reducing their coinage to those videogames commonly labelled walking simulators and more generally "referring to games in which presence in awareness spaces is central to the experience" (38).

A holistic view of the ambience act does not account for the smaller parts, the individual actions that constitute the ambience act in the first place. I therefore propose to complement it with Bogost's notion of "*unit operations*" (*Unit* ix), which he describes as "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" as well as "function over context, instances over longevity" (3, 4; cf. 3–8). These are the individual units that constitute the ambience act described by Galloway, which now appears not as a unified whole but rather as an amalgam of, to use Bogost's words "discrete, disconnected actions." It must be stressed that unit operations need not be machine acts, to stay with Galloway's terminology. Accessing another character's data profile in *Watch Dogs* is a significant unit operation and so is fighting a duel in the Wild West world of *Red Dead Redemption*; in Galloways scheme, these would fall under the category of "*diegetic operator act*" (22), that is, player action within the fictional world of the game. Combining the ideas of Galloway and Bogost, the concept of ambient operations zooms in on the particular acts and instances that make up the perceived ambience act and accords them the individual significance demanded by a unit-operational approach. An ambient operation, then, is anything that happens around the player character in the gameworld in any one instance of gameplay and that, therefore, is not the current center of attention. Any ambient operation is meaningful and significant in its own right and conceptually independent of any superordinate system, such as a videogame's scripted story.

Before I expand on this concept to characterize the gameworlds of the *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* series as well as similar videogames, I would like to return to two of Galloway's and Bogost's points from which I diverge. Galloway writes that, in an ambience act, "nothing changes that is of any importance" (*Gaming* 10). This is true only from a perspective of valorized, goal-oriented gameplay. While ambient operations generally remain without consequence for the state of the gameworld as such – this is discussed in more depth in chapter 4 – they are indeed substantial for the production of cultural resonances and, ultimately, the cultural work of videogames with a high density of ambient operations, such as the ones examined in this book. Ambient operations, in this context, are not only important but essential. Additionally, while Bogost's "unit operations privilege function over context" (*Unit* 4), ambient operations signify in conjuncture with a thematic context; they function independently, but they gravitate toward an accumulation of meaning linked to a particular context. This context is also expressed through other elements, such as narrative, sound, visuals, and game mechanics, all of which make up the larger atmosphere of the videogame (cf. Zimmermann, "Historical" 24–25; cf. Böhme 21–48). Ambient operations are meaningful not only because they have discernible effects on gameplay (cf. Salen and Zimmerman 32–36), and on the player's experiencing of particular moments of gameplay,

but especially because they are expressive of a subject matter exceeding any particular gamic action. Being challenged to and fighting a duel in *Red Dead Redemption*, for example, is a ludic challenge testing the player's reaction and aiming skills, but it also signifies the conventions of the Western and thus connects one particular play action with a larger generic discourse. Ambient operations, then, are discrete yet enmeshed in a web of culturally productive meaning that is never random but always particular, as the following chapters demonstrate.

Ambient operations can be understood by a narrow definition as well as a broad one. Under the narrow definition, ambient operations comprise only that which perceivably happens in the immediate vicinity of the player character and which in any moment can instantaneously become the center of the player's attention (and action). These operations may be off-screen, but they readily enter the screen without needing more than a change of the player-character's perspective. Under the broad definition, on the other hand, one can also include background operations that continue to happen in the gameworld invisibly even without the player character's presence, even though the player may at any point seek out to engage with them. Drawing examples from *GTA V*, a shootout between gang members and cops falls under the narrow definition, the in-game stock market falls under the broad definition, and the in-game radio and TV spots can be located somewhere between the two poles. The analyses in the following chapters will consider examples for both definitions. Before moving on to the significance of ambient operations in the gameworlds of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, including the analytic value of the concept, I will expound the concrete functioning of ambient operations in action some more.

One major figuration of ambient operations are scripted events, which are especially common in Rockstar Games' open-world videogames of the past decade. Scripted events are predetermined occurrences in the gameworld that are triggered by a specific game state. Many videogames feature such events in order to advance the scripted story and facilitate progress in the game. We could call these 'narrative-induced events' (cf. Barbara) or, applying Galloway's terminology, 'operator-induced events' since they rely on a specific player action to occur – for instance, reaching a particular place or pushing a certain button in the game. Such events, then, hinge on narrative necessity and player performance. The videogames examined here, on the other hand, frequently feature seemingly random events that are neither imperative to advance the core story line nor necessarily contingent on player performance. Among these are, for example, a woman with a broken-down carriage, calling on the player passing by, asking to be escorted to the city in *RDR*, and the detection of impending crimes in the player character's vicinity in *WD*. We could call such incidents 'world-induced events' or 'machine-induced events' since they emerge from the procedural workings of the gameworld. All of

these events are, in the strictest sense, machine acts. The perceived randomness is only an illusion created through algorithms reacting to specified game states, but this does not diminish its effect on the player's experiencing of the gameworld; to them, these events appear as emerging organically from the world they are navigating. For world-induced events, no perceivable *specific* action is required on the player's part; the conditions for such an event to occur are visible only on the level of the game's code and can, at best, be inferred by reading their signs in the gameworld.

World-induced events are important because they capture and redirect the player's attention and, therefore, affect their interpretation of the gameworld. In their paper on "Content Design for Virtual Environments," Jerry Isdale et al. describe similar elements as "[p]erceptual opportunities" in order to examine "the relationship between objects' various meanings and the way these affect users' behavior" (524). They distinguish between three forms that such perceptual opportunities can take: "Sureties deliver denotative meaning and collectively try to establish basic believability. Surprises seek to deliver connotative meaning and thus collectively seek to deliver purpose. Shocks are perceptual bugs that tend to negate the other two forms by breaking the illusion" (524). Within this framework, the scripted events described before mainly correspond to the category of "[s]urprises," which refer to "nonmundane details that are not always predictable but they do arise, however surprisingly, from the consciously accepted logic of a space. Surprises therefore are intended to deliver the memorable pleasures of the world by allowing users to accumulate conscious experiences. Surprises are concerned with the connotative meaning of VE [virtual environment] content" (525). More specifically, ambient operations, especially under the narrow definition, fall under the subcategory of "[a]ttractors," which "seek to draw users' attention directly to areas of interest or to situations that require action" (525). In this sense, they must be understood as repeatedly drawing player attention to constitutive aspects of the projected fictional world and, by extension, American culture.

Discussing the freedom and multiplicity of choice in *Grand Theft Auto*, Bogost similarly explains that "the player can choose from a multitude of functions at any given time, each chosen in reference to specific transitional cues the environment provides" (*Unit* 159). His conception of "transitional cues" supports my insistence on the ambient quality of these operations. By definition, 'ambient' is that which is in the surrounding, not the center; therefore, such operations are somewhat fleeting in the sense that they are peripheral until they capture the player's attention and redirect their action. At this point an ambient operation ceases to be ambient as it becomes the center of attention while, at the same time, other processes remain or become ambient. The field of ambient operations is thus

characterized by continual dynamic variation in relation to the player's swerving gameplay.

Building on Bogost's idea, I argue that it is not only relevant that player action is redirected and that meaning emerges from these transitional moments between one action and another, but that the workings of these ambient operations are always expressive of the world's subject matter. Bogost's "transitional cues" are always also expressive and, thus, interpretative cues that prompt players to make sense of their interaction with the gameworld along particular lines. This is amplified by the ways in which they insist on the significance of a game's diegetic design and momentarily but repeatedly delegate goal-oriented play to a subordinate role. Ambient operations always carry the potential to break a purely ludic flow of gamic action and reintroduce the thematic as they capture and redirect the player's attention during play.

Zimmermann and Huberts's conception of the ambience action game is, therefore, ill-equipped to capture the functioning of the videogames at stake here. While their highlighting of "awareness spaces" convincingly foregrounds the significance of perceptual shifts from player action to expressive elements of the gameworld, the rigid distinction between "possibility spaces" and "awareness spaces" is untenable for the likes of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* (Zimmermann and Huberts 32, 34). This distinction may well serve an analytic function capable of producing fresh perspectives on popular videogames, especially when "understand[ing] the ambience action game as a specific mindset which changes the way players of digital games play" (46). Zimmermann himself demonstrates this in a different article, in which he offers a reading of *RDR2* played as an ambience action game. The title, "Ethical Boredom in the Wilderness: Treating *Red Dead Redemption 2* as an Ambience Action Game," already indicates that it really is a perspective, or even attitude, rather than a generic classification. Hence Zimmermann's realization, drawing on Aarseth, that "it still takes an act of 'transgressive play' by players to really utilize the potential of these awareness spaces" ("Ethical" 62). In practice, the possibility space and the awareness space are ultimately one and the same here. Ambient operations create awareness at the same time as they open up possibilities for meaningful player action, so any way of separating the two layers deprives these operations of some of their meaning.

One can distinguish between push and pull instances of ambient operations (cf. Calleja 122–124). The first comprise, for example, said random events common in Rockstar Games' gameworlds, such as a man beating up a woman in the street in *RDR*. Here the game pushes a thematically significant event, which is expressive of the gameworld's misogyny, into the player's center of attention. Deliberately hacking into and eavesdropping on another character's phone call in *WD2*,

on the other hand, is an example of the second category. Here the player is pulling a meaningful process, the covert invasion of someone else's privacy, from the gameworld that surrounds their player character. In both cases, the operation is situated in the game's diegesis. The difference is that push instances are initiated by the machine, thus falling under the narrow definition of ambient operations, whereas pull instances are initiated by the player, thus falling under the broad definition. In both cases, player and gameworld are in constant meaningful operation with one another; player action can be a trigger but is not necessarily one.

Discussing the importance of narrative as a means of comprehension of both the ludic and the representational dimensions of videogames, Michael Nitsche addresses similar phenomena and argues that "the single unit to be recognized is the individual evocative narrative element. These evocative narrative elements support the necessary understanding of the gameworld and the player's positioning in it" (42). While his main interest lies in the ways these elements enable gameplay by helping players understand what there is to do in a particular gameworld, to facilitate action, Nitsche's point can be applied to the expressive potentials of the worlds themselves and their operations, too. The "evocative narrative elements" he speaks of do not only aid navigation, intradiegetic interaction, and the development of goal-oriented strategies; they are also always fundamentally worldbuilding devices that serve to project a plausible fictional world that carries meaning in itself. This perspective remains implicit in Nitsche's argument: "Evocative elements are included in virtual environments to improve the meaning-building process of the player. The elements are not 'stories' but suggestive markings. They are clustered in certain ways and aimed to trigger reactions in players in order to help them to create their own interpretations" (44).

In his influential book *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, Wolfgang Iser argues, among other things, that every literary text employs a specific repertoire of conventions and themes, both literary and extra-literary, as well as its very own socio-cultural context, and that this repertoire structures each reader's individual response to the text, which both opens up and limits the possible number of different readings of the same text. Iser's argument can be related to Marie-Laure Ryan's "principal of minimal departure," described in *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (51), which posits that readers interpret any fictional world by recourse to their knowledge of the real world and its principles and laws, applying the latter as far as possible to the fictional world, however fantastic it may be. Both of these dynamics can, in principle and accounting for media-specific differences, be extended to videogames generally and ambioperative gameworlds in particular. Players do not only interpret the ludic but also the worldly aspects of the videogame as they relate to the gameworld's "repertoire" (Iser 115) and employ "the principle of minimal depar-

ture" (Ryan 51) from their own individual perspective to make sense of the fictional world with the help of prior knowledge and experience.

The considerations sketched out above further highlight the centrality of ambient operations specifically in open gameworlds and the kinds of videogames examined in this book. The continual flow of a single, contiguous gamespace that constitutes nearly the entire projected fictional world affords a sense of completeness that enables an absolute enveloping of the player in meaningful processes. The freedom granted to players to stray from the central impetus of scripted narratives and goal-oriented gameplay not only permits those interstitial moments of redirecting player action but also facilitates repeated exposure to and engagement with expressive processes specific to a particular gameworld and its cultural entanglements. This also shows that the open space on its own, despite the "spatial fetishism [my translation]" in these games (Nohr 7, cf. 18), is less meaningful than one is tempted to think, which is one reason why not all open-world videogames function the way those in the *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* series do, especially in their utilization of ambient operations. As Bogost writes about *Grand Theft Auto*: "GTA's structured configuration of possible actions within a larger space suggests a broader expressive tactic: space is used not for the repleteness of exploration, but in order to structure smaller, singularly meaningful experiences" (*Unit* 159). These "smaller, singularly meaningful experiences" become possible precisely because of the open structure of the game, but it is those experiences, facilitated by ambient operations, that matter, rather than the space itself.

Having defined ambient operations, the question remains why they should receive special attention when approaches based in more specialized forms of visual culture studies, ludology, narratology, media studies, and other theoretical frameworks have managed to produce key insights about open-world videogames, including the ones studied here, without recourse to this concept. The answer to this question is twofold. First, accentuating ambient operations does not replace or even devalue those other approaches, it complements them by shifting emphasis to a frequently neglected aspect of experiencing gameworlds. The following chapters, therefore, still incorporate many of those other aspects in their analyses even as they put ambient operations in the center of attention – chapter 2 even defers its game analysis focusing on ambient operations to the very last subchapter. Second, and most importantly, ambient operations are among the most consistently active expressive elements in the kind of open-world videogames examined here. Players may choose to follow this or that path, take on this or that quest, advance this or that strand of narrative, but whichever way they act, they are always surrounded by ambient operations that consistently signify matters beyond rule-based ludic challenges, scripted plots focalized through the

protagonist, and audiovisual presentation – although, as the following case studies show, ambient operations stay connected to and may even come in the guise of all of these. The open-world structure, furthermore, encourages exploration, which can lead to a deeper engagement with the themes expressed by the gameworld and even trigger a kind of contemplative mode of gameplay. The literature on phenomena like the "*flâneur electronique*" (Atkinson and Willis 818), "[t]he stroller in the virtual city" (Zhang 23), and in-game tourism (Miller, "Grove") suggests that this is often the case. The player in these videogames may defy a variety of features but they cannot escape exposure to ambient operations, which often actively push certain subject matters into focus, prompting the player's active engagement with the themes presented. Ambient operations, therefore, are crucial participants in the act of playing American since they are the site where gameworlds themselves, alongside players, play American. Those fleeting, interstitial moments of shifting attention and redirected action pervading these gameworlds, then, demand special attention, which they often do not receive in critical analyses since they frequently remain inconspicuous.

Ambient operations, by definition, belong to the diegesis, and the diegetic elements in the videogames examined here generally outshine the nondiegetic elements. The latter are either reduced to the minimum necessary to enable gameplay or made to look as if they are part of the gameworld. Most of the relevant nondiegetic functions in *Watch Dogs*, such as the skill tree, for example, are displayed on the player-character's smartphone, thus linking them with the gameworld. Among the more important nondiegetic elements in these gameworlds, on the other hand, are the mini maps displayed in the corner of the screen, which help players navigate the gameworld and reach mission goals, just as occasional visual overlays do. Gameplay predominately takes place in real time within the gameworld, rather than in pauses and game action menus (cf. Galloway, *Gaming* 19). This privileging of the diegetic over the non-diegetic is far from unique to this game form, but it does draw attention to one of the meanings of 'ambient': to surround or envelop completely. In order to be enveloped by ambient operations, the player has to be represented in and recognized by the game as an avatar. An analytic focus on ambient operations, therefore, only makes sense in videogames in which the player takes on the role of an indispensable player-character who is part of the diegetic world. It does not apply to, for example, real-time strategy games, construction and management simulations, or any round-based genres.

Since ambient operations are so pervasive in, and so central to experiencing, the gameworlds of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, it is possible to demarcate a subset of open-world videogames that can be called ambioperative gameworlds. Proceeding from my definition of ambient operations, an ambioperative gameworld continuously works in surrounding the player with

meaningful expressive operations that produce forceful effects on the player's experience of the videogame's subject matters. These operations are meaningful in the sense that they relate directly to exactly those subject matters, whatever these may be for any particular game. Another way to put this is that ambioperative gameworlds display an extraordinarily high density of ambient operations while other open gameworlds feature them only sparsely. Ambioperative gameworlds are, therefore, one extreme of a spectrum of open-world videogames ordered by the density of ambient operations. The franchises studied in this book are exemplary for a distinctly pronounced form of ambioperative gameworlds. Other ambioperative gameworlds of varying degrees can, for example, be found in videogames and franchises like Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* series, Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* and more recent *Far Cry* titles, CD Projekt's *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* and *Cyberpunk 2077*, Sega's *Yakuza* series, and Square Enix's *Sleeping Dogs*. Few of these, however, rival the series analyzed here in the density and expressive quality of their ambient operations. Toward the other end of the spectrum, one can find open-world videogames in which ambient operations play a secondary role or even none at all, ranging from Rockstar Games' *L.A. Noire* to Square Enix's *Just Cause* series and Electronic Arts' latest *Need for Speed* racing games. There is a richness, almost a feeling of completeness, in the gameworlds at one end of the spectrum that is absent in those on the other end, even as many of those worlds are comparable in terms of scale and visual fidelity. The open-world form itself, then, appears to be of limited meaning only. Regarding the videogames analyzed in the following chapters, it is little more than a precondition for something more particular, something that depends on the open nature of the form to function but that ultimately exceeds it in its effect, as described before.

Framing a study of videogames through the lens of ambioperative gameworlds obviously shifts the analytic focus from the concept of a 'game' to that of a 'world' as a particular form of virtual environments. The worldly aspects of videogames often receive relatively little attention beyond formal considerations in academic writing on videogames, a few notable exceptions notwithstanding, such as Lisbeth Klastrup's dissertation, titled "Towards A Poetics of Virtual Worlds: Multi-user Textuality and The Emergence of Story," and Martin Hennig's monograph *Spielräume als Weltentwürfe: Kultursemiotik des Videospiels*. As such, components of the gameworld are privileged in the analysis of player experience, while nonetheless always connected to ludic action. These gameworlds exist, of course, only because they are designed to provide a compelling space for gameplay; yet, at the same time, the videogames that feature ambioperative gameworlds stand out among others and fascinate players precisely because of their worlds, not necessarily because of their gameplay, which tends to be somewhat conventional. One could even go so far as to argue that their worldness overshadows their

gameness, not only in perception but also in form. As Espen Aarseth and Gordon Calleja explain: "Although we, for ease of reference, call *Grand Theft Auto IV* a game, it would be more accurate to consider it as a virtual environment that simulates a city having a number of games embedded in it and a few linear storylines that players can progress through by completing sequences of gamelike activities." Ambioperative gameworlds are, therefore, also prime examples of what Henry Jenkins, borrowing from discussions of the design of Disney's theme parks, calls "environmental storytelling" ("Game" 122). Jenkins writes that "[e]nvironmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives" ("Game" 123). Ambioperative gameworlds use all four of these strategies, with a particular emphasis on the latter two as well as a particularly strong connection between the narrative contents expressed and the videogame's ludic components, its gamic action.

I have mentioned the question of atmosphere before, and this is the moment when it must be addressed in more depth. Because of the central importance of environmental aspects – employed as a purely technical term here, having nothing to do with nature – in ambioperative gameworlds, they constitute prime examples of a "new aesthetics" sketched out by Gernot Böhme. For Böhme, this new aesthetics is primarily concerned with the relationship between the qualities of a given environment and human being, awareness, perception, and sensation in that environment; the atmosphere, in turn, is that which operates between the two (Böhme 22). In the ambioperative gameworlds described here, specific actions in the virtual environment work as perceptual attractors that provide sensory stimuli for the player, regardless of their current occupation in the game. This web of affective elements between gameworld and player produces an atmosphere of the kind sketched out by Böhme. In the following case studies, this is an 'American' atmosphere in the sense that its qualities signify a sense of something which players socialized by and literate in a US-dominated popular culture unconsciously, or even pre-consciously, recognize as America – that is, the mediated double of the United States. Whether driving through South Los Santos listening to contemporary rap music and social commentary on Radio Los Santos in *GTA V*, strolling through a dystopian Chicago reading the personal data profiles of unsuspecting passers-by in *WD*, or being challenged to a duel while having a drink in the Rhodes Saloon in *RDR2*, all of these produce a specifically 'American' atmosphere; each in its distinct thematic focus and tone 'feels like' America. But not only that, it is precisely because of these gameworlds' ecological logic – their 'ecologic,' if you will – that such a perceptual experience of America is enabled

through these atmospheres. The sense of America in these videogames is not predominately expressed through goal-oriented, ludic action or plots; instead, it emerges from the environment, from the ambient operations of the gameworld.

Böhme writes that, in the "new aesthetics," aesthetic work has to be understood first and foremost as the "production of atmospheres" (25, my translation, cf. 35, 109). He assigns a special societal function to the fine arts, particularly visual arts, which in his view work to introduce and facilitate the engagement with atmospheres generally as they are encountered in settings that are relieved of incentives to act (Böhme 25). Although videogames generally are "an *action-based* medium" (Galloway, *Gaming* 3) and thus seldom entirely relieved of incentives to act, Böhme's remarks nonetheless help illustrate how ambioperative gameworlds enable the encounter with environments productive of atmospheres of America. Because the focus here is on free-roaming, open gameplay, often amounting to an explorative navigation of the gamespace and thus allowing a higher level of perceptiveness, immediate formalized ludic challenges and goals recede into the background (cf. Zimmermann, "Ethical" 53). Whereas for Böhme a museum, by relieving the visitor from incentives to act, allows them to truly appreciate the atmosphere produced between them and an artwork, ambioperative relieve the player of the pressure to pursue specific goals, which in turn allows her to fully take in the atmosphere emerging from her navigation of the gameworld. The player here is still very much acting and also frequently changing her center of attention and trajectory of action, but this type of interaction with the environment is irreducibly connected to the distinct environmental properties of the videogame and, therefore, produces an atmosphere that is somehow American. According to Böhme, an atmosphere is a specific reality, a reality shared by the one who perceives and that which is perceived (Böhme 34). Even though ambioperative gameworlds are virtual environments, one should take Böhme's account seriously and literally here. Not only do these gameworlds constitute a particular kind of reality as they are navigated by a player and their stand-in, the playable character, each acting in the presence of and also on the other, the America produced by the atmosphere emerging from this interaction is also very much real. In this moment, America, this vision arising from a transnational imaginary given form and distributed by a plethora of media productions, is played out, played on, played with – it is the moment of playing American.

There is no metaphor here. Even as the worlds are virtual and the characters are virtual and the actions are virtual, the engagement with America is real. When Dan Houser says that "GTA is America" (qtd. in Stuart, "*Grand*"), he refers to the ways in which *Grand Theft Auto*'s trademark formula is intimately tied to distinct keystones of American culture so that it might not work similarly if it were to focus on a different society instead. Another way of reading it, however,

is that what players of *Grand Theft Auto* – or *Watch Dogs*, or *Red Dead Redemption*, or other similar videogames – encounter when they find themselves acting within the atmospheres produced by these videogames truly is America, if by 'America' one means this powerful idea related but not identical to the United States, the latter in fact desperately depending on the former rather than the other way around. While the creation of atmospheres is a matter tied to the specific representation in the videogames studied here, the next subchapter also sketches out some points that connect the formal qualities of ambient operations and ambioperative gameworlds with salient issues in American culture and American studies.

Returning to the formal features of ambioperative gameworlds, a specific example should help illustrate how they function in practice. Rockstar Games' *RDR*, for instance, is a videogame about the Western more than one about the American West – the fact that it is also a videogame Western is discussed at length in chapter 4. It features some of the genre's typical narratives and characters, and it is set in a fictional part of the American West, with its iconographic landscapes, just as the last remnants of the Old West give way to industrial America. Besides these cornerstones, which can be found in many other Western-themed videogames (cf. Wills 58–82), *RDR* continuously signifies central tropes of the Western genre through the ambient operations of its gameworld. Simply moving through *RDR*'s world, players witness shootouts between outlaws, stagecoach robberies, cougars attacking cowboys, bandits riding into town with guns blazing, wild horses frolicking across the plains, strangers challenging them to duels in the streets, and much more. None of these events are bound to any particular player action or any specific state in the game (at least none that would be perceivable to the player); in this sense, they are not deliberately reproducible. Yet they occur repeatedly and in varying ways all the time. These things simply happen in this kind of world, just as they happen in many Westerns. Rather than being delivered as one-off examples evocative of a larger fictional world that has to be imagined by the audience, however, we get the world itself here: *RDR*'s ambioperative gameworld is exactly that: a world, a system that continuously operates according to the particular logics of the Western. I elaborate on this in chapter 4.

In their discussion of videogame aesthetics and emergence, Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca introduce a distinction between what they call "world-centered" and "protagonist-centered" videogames. "In the case of the former," they write, "the game is a world with its own active laws of physics, and here things occur without the protagonist necessarily being involved (generally in the active off-screen space)" (150). These are contrasted with videogames in which "the entire game system revolves around the protagonist" and in which "nothing noteworthy takes place beyond the radius of the pro-

tagonist's action" (150). The videogames studied in this book elude such a distinction because in ambioperative gameworlds "things occur without the protagonist necessarily being involved" at the same time as "nothing noteworthy takes place beyond the radius of the protagonist's action," or at least their *possible* action. As shown before, during the discussion of world-induced events, ambioperative gameworlds predominantly generate their meaning from within but only wherever the player character is present.

Ambioperative gameworlds are fundamentally a form of the twenty-first century because they are inherently more "[p]rocess-intensive" than others (Bogost, *Persuasive* 45), requiring the execution of computational processes in constant excess of necessary gameplay, in a sense continuously generating complex gameplay potential alongside gameplay in progress. As technological progress in processing power usually goes hand in hand with the development of ever more detailed gameworlds (cf. Nitsche 2) – with each constantly pushing the other forward, especially since the triumph of 3D during the second half of the 1990s – truly ambioperative gameworlds become possible only after truly three-dimensional graphics demand a certain level of computing power in videogame systems. At the same time, after this perceived point-of-no-return, 3D has established itself as the default configuration, especially of avatar-based games, on home consoles and PCs (cf. Nitsche 2; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 133–136). The conventional coupling of computing power and three-dimensional gameworlds can be seen as a decisive factor in the apparent restriction of ambioperative gameworlds to videogames featuring three-dimensional gameplay in three-dimensional space, which further sets them apart from a much longer history of open gameworlds, as indicated earlier.

Ambioperative gameworlds are complex systems marked by emergence, which is the act of "systems generating complex and unpredictable patterns of behavior from simple rules" (Salen and Zimmerman 158; cf. Juul 73–83). In terms of experiencing them as worlds, such gameworlds reach a level of complexity that eludes most other videogame structures. Absent player interaction, the majority of gameworlds are either "*fixed*" or "*periodic*," which means that they either remain static and unchanging or fall into simple repetitions of patterns (Salen and Zimmerman 155). Ambioperative gameworlds, on the other hand, often feature situations that appear to naturally emerge from the interplay of their own individual parts, independent of player input. This largely happens in the form of what I called world-induced events earlier. While all these events are scripted in the sense that they are coded to appear when certain parameters are met, their sheer quantity and range coupled with their irregularity – there is no discernible pattern with regard to aspects like order, frequency, or context – creates the experience of a complex world that affords emergence from within itself. Such an observation conforms to a view of complexity "that understands the operation of

stable systems as sets of organized but nonpredictive individuated functions" (Bogost, *Unit* 5). What matters here is the effect of appearing complex, regardless of the actual complexity of the processes. One can describe this as a variation of the so-called "*Eliza effect*," named after MIT computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum's famous language processing system from the 1960s (Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive* 24). This effect, according to Wardrip-Fruin, "is the well-known phenomenon in which audience expectations allow a digital media system to appear much more complex on its surface than is supported by its underlying structure" (*Expressive* 15).

Even though these gameworlds effectively present themselves as being 'living' systems, this is, in fact, nothing but an illusion created through a deliberate use of perspective. Using the example of *Grand Theft Auto V*, which, at the time, was perhaps the most elaborate ambioperative gameworld available, and employing the use of off-screen space as their focus, Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca develop a critical point concerning this matter:

> Modern games tend towards more active off-screen space, whereas almost all arcade games had passive off-screen space; but the distinctions are not always clear-cut. Take, for instance, *Grand Theft Auto V*. While often applauded for its "breathing" game world and the openness of its gameplay, *GTA V* is not, in fact, a living simulation of an entire city. At any given moment, objects that are not directly related to the player character (those that are very close or on the screen, or being tracked by the player's radar) are not being processed by the game. As an example: the player hijacks the car of a poor city dweller–the victim does not then lose his job, become a criminal, and pose a danger to the player in dark alleys. Instead, he or she just disappears when the player character has reached a certain distance from the crime scene. Similarly, a dramatic car crash does not slow down traffic in other places in the city, or leave nearby streets unguarded by police. A similarly partial approach to off-screen space is found in virtually all recent action games, such as *Red Dead Redemption* and *BioShock*. (138)

Even though it underscores the illusion sustained by these gameworlds, this account supports the concept of ambioperative gameworlds (resulting from a high density of ambient operations) presented here. The defining feature of an ambioperative gameworld is not that it is at work everywhere, but that it operates wherever the player is affected. Additionally, it also points to the technological aspect once more since the mere fact that, to save computing resources, only those parts that pertain to the player-in-play at any one moment are being processed indicates the high process intensity of these gameworlds, and thus their dependence on a high level of processing power.

Returning to the nature of ambient operations themselves once more, foregrounding them in one's analysis also means devoting special attention to instances of "procedural expression" (Bogost, *Persuasive* 5, cf. 3–11). As scholars like Bogost and Wardrip-Fruin assert, computational procedures always carry and express

meaning as procedures, whether in the code itself or in the "*semiotic domain*" experienced by the user (Sicart, *Beyond* 45). Accordingly, meaning in videogames is often conveyed through the execution of procedures, in which players are implicated, and ambioperative gameworlds are a prime example for this. These kinds of meaningful expressive operations include those that generate a particular meaning related to the projected world in the player's experience of that world connected with the player's personal repertoire of cultural knowledge, experiences, associations, assumptions, and so on. Witnessing the impending hanging of a character in *RDR*, for instance, is expressive of the trope of self-administered justice common in the Western; the character dies, subjected to the will of a mob, unless the player, ignorant of the reason for the attempted execution, intervenes by way of killing the entire mob. Whichever way this event plays out, both outcomes are the result of an operationalization of a common Western trope and the execution of a procedure in accordance with the trope. Procedure and execution here implicate both the computer and the player, a point that remains important throughout the case studies in the following chapters.

Nonetheless, ambient operations do not exclusively generate meaning procedurally. In both the narrow and broad definition of ambient operations, one can find examples of procedural expression as well as visual, aural, and narrative expression. Highlighting procedurality, then, does not mean to neglect those other modes of signification but rather to accord all of them equal importance. Consequently, the examples analyzed in the following chapters cover a broad spectrum of ambient operations. In the same vein, and though they are the main focus, ambient operations are not the only aspect considered in my analyses; as indicated before, ambient operations work alongside other expressive features of the videogames examined here to result in the phenomenon of playing American, so they are always considered in a larger, game-specific context. Ambient operations, therefore, are not the only thing that matters here, yet they are crucial to the act of playing American in both its human and machinic instantiations.

## 1.3 Ambient Operations and American Studies: Thoughts on Form and Culture

It goes without saying that the videogames analyzed in this book explicitly relate to cultures of the United States by way of their themes and settings, but the connection of the formal feature of ambient operations to American culture is less self-evident. Ambioperative gameworlds created by studios from all over the world have accommodated a great variety of settings, narratives, and game mechanics; some realistic and some fantastic. Claiming that some quality of ambient

operations inherently ties them to American culture more than to any other is untenable. There is, however, something to be said about how ambient operations and ambioperative gameworlds are expressive of issues not specific to American culture but central to critical work in American studies. Some of these are discussed in more depth in the following chapters, but at least one aspect deserves attention beforehand: practical similarities between ambient operations and the neoliberal conditions in which they appear.

Cultural content always has a form, which means that any attempt to understand it has to reckon with the form itself in some way. "Things take forms, and forms organize things," writes Caroline Levine (10), arguing for a renewed attention to the effects and implications of form in the study of culture – renewed because form has been central to prominent theoretical approaches to literature and culture for the longest time. One example for this is Fredric Jameson's argument about "the *ideology of form*," by which he refers to "the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production" (*Political* 62). This understanding of a form signifying something else is, however, not what Levine is concerned with, as she explains: "One might say that I am flipping [Hayden] White's terms upside down: rather than hunting for the buried *content of the form*, I propose here to track *the forms of the content*, the many organizing principles that encounter one another inside as well as outside of the literary text" (16). My analytic focus on ambient operations in this book seeks to attend to both sides of the coin. The following paragraphs are devoted to sketching out some of the contents that are signified by ambient operations and the form of the ambioperative gameworld, which relate to matters that, while not exclusive to American culture, remain core interests of the field of American studies today. The subsequent chapters then address "*the forms of the content*" each in their own ways as they attend to the formal configurations of the respective videogames' subject matters and how the presentation of these contents is conditioned by the structure of the ambioperative gameworld and the expressive work of ambient operations.

While it may have lost its edge as a critical concept, nearly a half century of neoliberal policies in the United States have restructured American society and affected American culture so extensively that neoliberalism continues to be a central reference point in contemporary American studies. Although stipulating a direct causal link between neoliberalism and ambioperative gameworlds would be a bit of a stretch for several reasons, including temporal disconnects as well as the actual variety of gameworld designs coexisting and maintaining popularity today, the functioning of ambient operations and their effect on the player's experiencing of the gameworld do resemble some issues commonly attributed to neoliberalism. The question of freedom is central here.

A high degree of player freedom is a defining feature of most open-world videogames, and freedom has been a label applied to the likes of *Grand Theft Auto* for a long time; Gonzalo Frasca's article "Sim Sin City: Some Thoughts about *Grand Theft Auto 3*," for instance, is a case in point here. Likewise, liberty and freedom are among the defining features of the self-understanding and common self-descriptions of the United States (Foner xiii; Lakoff 3, 5; Fischer 3–11). In the videogames, the player is free to play in various ways, to stray from the main storyline, to indulge in the gameworld with little ludic or narrative restraint, and more. In the United States, ideas of liberty, of being in charge of one's own destiny and act independently from the will of others (including the democratically elected government) continue to shape political discourses, serve as justifications to oppose societal changes, and attribute personal successes and failures to individual behavior without accounting for structural conditions beyond any individual person's control. Both open-world videogames and American culture, then, fixate on freedom as something akin to the ne plus ultra of organizing gameplay and social life, respectively.

What appears as a banal and arbitrary coincidence at first sight proves to be quite intriguing once thought further. The freedom in these videogames is something of an illusion; you cannot, in fact, do anything you want. All you can do is play by the rules (cf. Wark 118, 120–121). Every possible interaction is prescribed in the code, which translates into several affordances and an infinitude of constraints, even concerning actions that would make sense diegetically: you cannot break into every building in *Grand Theft Auto*, and neither can you dig a hole in the ground and bury a body. In a similar vein, freedom in the real world, in the United States and elsewhere, relies just as much on rules and regulations as it does in videogames. The ideal of freedom and liberty in the United States is exactly that: an ideal, or even a contestation over competing sets of ideals, rather than a reality. Historian Eric Foner summarizes this condition as follows: "Over the course of our history, American freedom has been both a reality and a mythic ideal – a living truth for millions of Americans; a cruel mockery for others. For some, freedom has been a birthright taken for granted. For others, it is 'not a gift but an achievement,' in the words of the philosopher Samuel DuBois Cook, a close friend of Martin Luther King, Jr." (xxi). From the beginning, freedom in the United States has always been characterized by painful contradictions and inequalities.

In their discrepancy between a perceived greater freedom of action and a gamic system that is, in fact, tightly controlled, open-world videogames in general and ambioperative gameworlds in particular are closely related to the "*societies of control*" described by Gilles Deleuze ("Post-Script" 4). These gameworlds work less as enclosures, as would discrete levels, and more in terms of the "*modulation*" typical of the control society (Deleuze, "Post-Script" 4); movement and

player action are largely free, but both are not only controlled by the mere circumstance that any possible action is prescribed by the code but also by the way the gameworld is designed. While all kinds of spatial movements and game actions are possible, some are more likely than others simply because of two properties: the topography of the game space and the ambient operations of the gameworld. Both direct players along certain paths (for example, along streets and tracks rather than cross-country) and toward certain actions (reacting to world-induced events rather than interacting randomly with in-game objects and NPCs) (cf. Jenkins 18).

It is a fact well known that players generally cannot go anywhere they would like to in a videogame because the player character may not be able to move past certain obstacles, depending on the controlling options made available to the player (once again determined by the code); what counts as an obstacle here may, in terms of visual representation, range from a wooden crate to a mountain range. The more interesting topological feature in the context of this section, however, are not the hard boundaries such as a wall that is just a bit too high to jump over or even the very limits of the skybox that contains the entire gameworld (cf. Bonner, "World-Shaped" 72–77). More striking are the many features of these gameworlds that structure movement through them without dictating it (or precluding certain routes). Among these are the streets of virtual Chicago, the country roads of Blaine County, and the railroads of New Hanover. They all regulate navigation of the gameworld by facilitating movement. When I say they facilitate movement I refer to the way that progressing through the gameworld becomes easier and often also faster when sticking to those paths, which run like lifelines through these virtual worlds – easier because they aid navigation to relevant locations, i.e., those prompting formalized game challenges and story missions, and faster because in each of these games, vehicles ranging from horses to sports cars move faster on such routes than they do in the spaces beyond. This implicit directing of in-game movement is an excellent example for the kind of control described by Deleuze and, in fact, right in line with his own example of the functioning of highways, which also control but do not confine.

The systemic operations and especially the ambient operations in the videogames examined here fundamentally control, but do not discipline, player action. In *GTA V*, a blinking icon on the mini map and the NPC represented by it calling for the player character's, and hence the player's, attention encourages the player to follow certain paths of action without prescribing them. Players do not have to react to and act on such random events, but many will; the choice is theirs, but it is a choice that is tilted toward acting rather than ignoring. In *RDR2*, a fire burning bright at night somewhere in the woods likewise tempts players to go see who is there – a group of prospectors setting up camp or a gathering of Klansmen

burning a cross? – hence controlling, to a degree, Arthur Morgan's nightly travels. He can voyage anywhere in the gameworld by any path, road or cross-country, but most of his journeys will follow a trail of ambient operations. In *WD*, Aiden Pearce will likely stick to locations surveilled by cameras and move along paths guaranteeing camera access, and he will also generally neglect deserted areas since there will be no one to hack. Again, Pearce's movements and actions are free but controlled through such ambient operations.

The previous elaborations on topography and ambient operations mirror an image employed by Deleuze: "A control is not a discipline. In making highways, for example, you don't enclose people but instead multiply the means of control. I am not saying that this is the highway's exclusive purpose, but that people can drive infinitely and 'freely' without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled ("Having" 18). The way in which players are thus generally free but largely controlled in ambioperative gameworlds follows the logic of the control society described by Deleuze, which can be found in postindustrial countries around the world. Galloway makes the argument that, structurally, all videogames work according to the logic of the control society in the informatic age (*Gaming* 84–106). Here I am more concerned with how this logic translates into the design of the gameworld. When he writes that videogames are "*coterminous with*" and even "fetishize control" (*Gaming* 92, 93), he refers to the ways in which playing these games is fundamentally structured and thus controlled by their algorithms. In videogames, nothing ever happens that is unaccounted for; everything that can be displayed on screen is predetermined in the code. This is precisely how the algorithm controls rather than disciplines, to stay with Galloway and Deleuze: players have a degree of agency, which enables play to emerge from their interactions with the game system, but the scope of actions and events is invariably determined by the code and algorithm. In ambioperative gameworlds, control resides to a large degree in ambient operations.

The emergence of the control society coincides with the rise and subsequent hegemony of neoliberalism from the 1980s onward. Despite apparent discrepancies between the theory and practice of neoliberalism (as well as the material effects of the latter), it has quite successfully (re-)established 'freedom' as the dominant societal ideal. Nearly a half century of neoliberalism has proven that, in reality, "[t]he freedoms it [the neoliberal state] embodies reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital" and that, principally, the neoliberal project amounts to a comprehensive redistribution of economic means from the bottom to the top, in other words "the restoration of economic power to the upper class" (Harvey 7, 26). Nonetheless, the ideal of freedom has so forcefully been infused by the neoliberal understanding of the term that it is now all to easily weaponized against initiatives for social,

political, and economic change that threaten to challenge neoliberalism's hegemony. And one of the reasons why this reframing has been so successful especially in the United States is the importance of freedom for a common American self-understanding as described before (cf. Harvey 39).

Freedom as an idea can work as a smoke screen that conceals mechanisms which, in reality, have effects detrimental to what some would consider being free; this is true for both neoliberal societies and ambioperative gameworlds, the latter of which at times appear to resemble the former. In the way described above, the America played in the ambioperative gameworlds studied here emerges as a place that suggests freedom and agency while constantly keeping both in check. The latter, however, is often overshadowed by the former in both the experience of any of these videogames and the discourse around them. Not a single open-world game release goes by without either the producers, marketing, the videogames press, or players themselves – often all in unison – highlighting the freedom afforded by any of these titles. In this sense, videogames are certainly not far removed from the nation state of the United States and its own discourse of America, which after all is repeatedly referred to as "the land of the free" – a line harking back to "The Star-Spangled Banner," the official national anthem of the United States – even today, after indigenous genocide, after slavery, after Jim Crow and segregation, at a time when many Americans, due to ongoing discriminatory policies based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, are still not free nor possess comprehensive rights equal to some of their more fortunate fellow citizens.

Yet more intriguing than the discursive parallels between open-world videogames and the United States' self-fashioning is how the former actually contribute to the latter in the case of the specimen examined in this book. Since the ambioperative gameworlds of the *Grand Theft Auto*, *Watch Dogs*, and *Red Dead Redemption* series all conjure their own versions of America for players to engage with, the fact that the discourse around such videogames often fixates on the freedom and agency they afford players must be considered in its relation to the formation called American culture here. The fixation on player agency and the simulation of American worlds in these videogames cannot, in fact, be separated from each other, which is to say that one cannot legitimately consider the representations of America without including the factor of player freedom in gameplay or talk about the open-world design of these titles without taking into account that these worlds are unequivocally 'American.' To be absolutely clear here, I am referring specifically to the videogames considered in this book; I am not arguing that every open-world game needs to be understood in this way, but that every ambioperative gameworld that unmistakably depicts some kind of America must be viewed in this light. The notions of freedom and agency are coupled to the portrait of America during gameplay – that is, during the act of playing American –

so both are inevitably experienced together by the player, whether they are aware of this or not. This coupling, in turn, arguably reproduces the indivisible unity of the ideas of freedom and America as upheld in the transnational American imaginary.

The agency afforded players in these videogames is clearly the freedom to choose but not a freedom from choice, which is to say that this freedom has a propensity to turn agency into compulsion. Ambioperative gameworlds place the burden of choice on the player in every instance – discussed in more detail under the concept of the logic of 'selaction' in chapter 4 – hence transferring responsibility for the gameplay experience to them. This transferal is perfectly in line with the neoliberalization of society and culture. As with the question of control – the control society as described by Deleuze is, indicated before, partly congruent with neoliberalism, especially in its emphasis on flexibility – the issue of personal responsibility must be considered in light of the American qualities of the ambioperative gameworlds at stake here. Just as the notion of freedom in open-world videogames cannot be considered independently from the interaction with versions of America in these games, neither can the question of personal responsibility and the discourse of choice. The America imagined by videogames like the *Grand Theft Auto* titles is a place that places all responsibility on the individual, so that each path, whether successful or unsuccessful, is the result of personal choice. Playing American is to choose and to assume responsibility for the results. Like the idea of freedom, personal responsibility is discursively framed as positive and desirable, which once more reproduces American ideals of self-sufficiency, the flip side of which is often a distrust toward state intervention – something somewhat explicitly replicated by *Grand Theft Auto* (Barrett 104–105) – even as the latter always already determines who is actually accorded the agency to choose, which is never distributed evenly in reality.

Another significant aspect only alluded to so far in this context is the kind of flexibility provided and required by ambioperative gameworlds, which is typical of both the control society and the post-Fordist economies of neoliberalism. A central feature of post-Fordism is a stress on flexibility in production and in the labor market. Workers can no longer rely on acquiring a single skill which they apply for the rest of their work lives, but, instead, are constantly expected and forced to re-skill to meet the demands of the market or else be left behind by an ever-changing job market that thrives on precariousness (Boltanski and Chiapello 112; cf. Fisher 32–34). In a similar vein, in order to succeed in an ambioperative gameworld, the player cannot rely on being, for example, either a good shot or a good race driver or a stealthy intruder, they often need to be any of those things whenever the game demands it – the "*adaptability* and *versatility*" sought in the employee today (Boltanski and Chiapello 112; cf. Weeks 70) are expected from the player as well. In *GTA*

*V*, for example, a wild car chase can transition into a shootout with the opposing party can transition into evading and hiding from the police. "To function effectively as a component of just-in-time production," Mark Fisher writes, "you must develop a capacity to respond to unforeseen events, you must learn to live in conditions of total instability" (34), and something similar holds true for gameplay in an ambioperative gameworld. If just-in-time production is the credo of post-Fordism, just-in-time skill application is the name of the game here. On a related note, the common distinction between the two realms of work and play is much blurrier than one would assume, as works like T.L. Taylor's *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, Julian Dibbell's *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot*, and Thomas Malaby's "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games" show, albeit with an emphasis on massively multiplayer online games. David Golumbia even goes so far as to argue that "many contemporary video games do not resemble analog games and also do not resemble other ludic or playfully imaginative activities that we have seen before in culture. On careful examination, many of the programs we call video games today much more nearly resemble something like work" ("Games" 179).

Returning to the notion of flexibility and going one step further, ambioperative gameworlds can be considered as playing a part in the cultural coding of flexibility as desirable for the consumer (cf. Shaviro 14) as well as the employee, even as its constitutive purpose of increasing profit by cutting costs often runs contrary to the interests of the worker. In terms of videogames, this kind of variety of actions is one of the distinct affordances of the open-world form and especially of ambioperative gameworlds. Ever more gameplay variety, in turn, raises player expectations; more options are often equated with more enjoyable gaming experiences, following a logic of one-upmanship within and between different franchises (cf. Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter for a discussion of such dynamics in the context of TV series).

Not surprisingly, these structural similarities in patterns of action between ambioperative gameworlds and neoliberal societies more generally also translate into the very production of the videogames examined in this book. The flexibility expected of lower-level developers driven by creative decisions further up the line, the ever longer phases of crunch time due to ever more complex gameworlds, and the neocolonial divisions of labor created by outsourcing and offshoring "less profitable or more routine aspects of development to different parts of the world" (Woodcock 71) – all of these resemble similar mechanisms in other industries transformed by decades of neoliberalism. Ambioperative gameworlds are one form of videogames where these dynamics are particularly visible. Chapter 4 elaborates on this in the context of the production of *RDR2*, which has at-

tracted a lot of public attention after revelations about the exploitative work culture at Rockstar Games.

As the preceding paragraphs have attempted to delineate, a focus on ambient operations not only attends to previously neglected aspects of some of the most popular open-world videogames of the past two decades, but also highlights these gameworlds' inherent relationships with neoliberalism and, thus, their relevance to an important focus of critical work in American studies today. The following three chapters apply, each in their own way, the theoretical and methodological considerations sketched out so far and, in doing so, produce descriptions and analyses of different ways in which playing American manifests itself in the videogames considered, both in and beyond ambient operations themselves.

Before heading into the case studies, a few words on their designs are necessary. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 each utilize different theoretical approaches and accordingly, different methodological toolsets. The respective theories and methods were chosen because they constitute the most productive angles on each of the videogame franchises studied in the context of the overarching issues of playing American and the reproduction of American culture. Despite their different ways of interrogating their respective objects, all three case study chapters similarly ask the same questions, albeit with disparate topical foci, thus resulting in explorations of dissimilar figurations of the same problems. They all speak to the same issues, only in different words, as it were. The other side of the same coin, then, is that each of the approaches can similarly be applied to the other case studies – correcting, of course, for the series' thematic foci – and yield useful results relevant to the central research interests of this book. Both *Watch Dogs* and *Red Dead Redemption* can be described as actor-networks reproductive of American culture, even as they may be harder to trace and less potent than *Grand Theft Auto*. Likewise, the practice-centered critique of *Watch Dogs* is equally relevant to *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption*, if arguably in different discursive fields. Finally, all of the three franchises are defined by a database structure – and so is the form of the ambioperative gameworld generally – even as not all of them coalesce so consistently around a single, clearly demarcated genre as *Red Dead Redemption* does with the Western. As will become apparent, traces of the other approaches do appear in all these chapters.

# 2 A Portrait of the Videogame as an Actor-Network: *Grand Theft Auto* and the Agencies of American Culture

Could a British author write the Great American Novel? Could this "unkillable dream" of American literature (Buell 5), a single work "painting the American soul," as the term's originator John Williams DeForest phrased it, be realized by an author who is not from the United States or even situated there? If, as Lawrence Buell argues, "it was agreed that . . . American authorship didn't guarantee the 'Americanness' of the product" (34), could we turn his statement on its head and argue that, by implication, American authorship is not necessary to create cultural objects perceived as essentially American (whatever we mean by this term)? This question is, of course, a rhetorical one since it has already been answered in the introduction: what appears American to an audience, is received as such, and does cultural work accordingly, is not a matter of national origin. What matters culturally is not the source but the paths of actions.

On to another question then: Need the Great American Novel be a novel? Understood literally, yes, of course; otherwise, it would not be called by this term. But regarding the desire to capture (from the author's point of view) or to sense (from the reader's point of view) some kind of essential American experience, is a self-contained form like the novel really the most appropriate place to look? If, as Kelleter contends, "what we call culture is fundamentally dependent on the repetition and variation of narratives" ("From" 99), would not a serial form, with its structural reliance on this very repetition and variation, be more appropriate? For example, what if the Great American Novel were a series of videogames?

In this chapter, I scrutinize the only plausible candidate for such a proposition: Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto*. It is a series of videogames that, with each new release (especially since *San Andreas*), has been credited with providing sharp diagnoses of some of the fault lines of American society, turned into compelling gameplay experiences in lively ambioperative gameworlds that, at times, seem to verge on "the territory of the sublime" in their depiction of American places (Murray, "*Grand*"). This is undoubtedly an astonishing achievement, given the fact that the series originated in the United Kingdom and is now developed collab-

**Note:** Parts of chapter 2 were previously published in German as "Ein Porträt des Videospiels als Akteur-Netzwerk: *Grand Theft Auto* und die Reproduktion amerikanischer Kultur" in *Spielzeichen III: Kulturen im Computerspiel/Kulturen des Computerspiels*, edited by Martin Hennig and Hans Krah. Verlag Werner Hülsbusch, 2020, pp. 254–276.


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oratively by studios around the globe, with the two most influential people in its development and rise to a global media phenomenon, brothers Sam and Dan Houser, having been born and raised in England. What interests me, though, is less how this unlikely, and yet so successful, candidate manages to represent certain perceived 'truths' about the contemporary United States. Rather, I want to examine what the *Grand Theft Auto* series is *to* American culture (cf. Kelleter, *Serial* 1). In other words, how does this popular videogame franchise, regardless of its transnational origin, act in this dynamic, yet surprisingly persistent, system that we, for better or worse, call *American culture*? Such a perspective locates meaning not only in cultural texts themselves but especially in their dealings with their cultural environment: the actors they activate, the practices they engender, and the ways these contribute to particular states of affairs.

My approach to *Grand Theft Auto* and its relation to American culture in this chapter is inspired by Bruno Latour's version of actor-network-theory, as formulated particularly in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, and Kelleter's application (and adjustment) of this methodology to the study of popular culture, specifically as demonstrated in *Serial Agencies:* The Wire *and Its Readers*. With a series as widely received and discussed as *Grand Theft Auto* – few, if any, other videogames have produced as many public reactions by journalists, academics, politicians, concerned parents, etc., over time – it becomes less and less instructive to provide yet another reading of something represented in the games; much has been written and there is little new to add, at least until the next installment provides additional nuances and variations of more of the same. Conversely, however, it is precisely because so much has been said about *Grand Theft Auto* that it proves to be rather productive to consider how the franchise has become a cultural actor in its own right and to investigate how it acts in and upon American culture. The goal of this chapter is thus to describe *Grand Theft Auto*, understood here as the series of videogames and "the communicative practices accompanying it" (Kelleter, *Serial* 5), as an actor-network and to trace the agencies of American culture that are active within this dynamic formation. This actor-network ultimately displays several dimensions of the cultural work performed by playing American.

"An actor is what is *made to* act by many others," Latour writes (46). In this understanding, "[a]n 'actor' in the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it" (Latour 46). This means that to describe *Grand Theft Auto* as an actor-network is to trace and make visible the actions of empirically existing entities in and around these videogames and to show how they are "making some difference to a state of affairs" (Latour 52). From this point of view, *Grand Theft Auto* is not read as somehow separate from an existing factual reality – as, for example, the outdated notion of Johan Huizinga's "magic circle" would have it (10) – that is

represented in some form in the videogames, which can then be interpreted. Instead, it is considered as actively participating in the reality we call American culture. In this chapter, then, the *Grand Theft Auto* series is treated, in Kelleter's words, "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" (*Serial* 4). Such an approach understands "culture as something that keeps *happening* – something that keeps ensuring the continuation of its own existence, enlisting for this purpose different players and products, ambitions and commitments, affiliations and identifications" (*Serial* 4). "On this view," Kelleter writes, "to study culture means to investigate specific (historical) processes of assembling, not just the results of certain assemblages. It means to study structure as consolidated action, to redescribe as mobile what has established itself as settled, to examine networks as work-nets of agency" (*Serial* 4). To return to the little intellectual spiel from the beginning of this chapter, the main problem with an idea(l) like the Great American Novel may well be that its disciples have it the wrong way round: rather than look for works that "[paint] the American soul" (DeForest), one should perhaps look instead at the objects and agencies which *make* others imagine and reiterate this perceived "soul" in the first place.

As the previous paragraphs already suggest, the conceptional idea for this chapter is strongly indebted to Kelleter's book on *The Wire*. A few words are necessary to explain both why his approach constitutes a promising model for a study of *Grand Theft Auto* and how the present chapter nonetheless differs from his work in its execution. Regarding the first point, there are at least two (certainly interconnected) reasons why his approach is extremely productive for a project that situates itself within the field of American studies and that studies a cultural object that is both popular and received in such a way as to leave its original field (for example, television) to circulate in spheres not necessarily tied intrinsically to the object itself. First, the method in general is one way to move beyond often unsatisfactory, largely reflective views of culture, in which a given work of art is said to mirror a certain state of affairs in the world, which frequently has to first be recovered, through interpretive work and a recourse to theory, from the depths beneath the text's surface. In the past two decades, however, a number of calls to reimagine the interpretation of cultural texts have emerged, with Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* being perhaps the most prominent one.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with such a method and it regularly produces insightful readings. Problems arise, however, as Kelleter himself addresses in a section titled "Upward Recognition" (*Serial* 50–55), when the readings become "tautological: The reader deploys Foucault to make sense of the narrative, then finds the narrative to mirror Foucault's 'ideas' (this is not only a Foucauldian reading but the series itself is Foucauldian), and finally concludes that such agree-

ment indicates the accuracy of these ideas" (*Serial* 51). This is not to diminish such approaches in cultural studies – after all, *Playing American*, too, employs forms of critical reading regularly toward various ends – but to show their limits and point to alternatives that may be more rewarding for particular objects and research interests. This brings us to the second reason: When a cultural object has become so popular – or controversial, which perhaps amounts to the same thing – that it produces a discourse well beyond its native sphere of existence (say, videogames), it becomes possible to empirically trace its dealings in a culture at large. What this means is that, beyond reproducing already circulating ideas within itself, the object can be said to evidently produce something outside of its own formal confines as it *makes others act* in certain ways. Thus, the question changes from "what is the role of *x* in object *y*?" to "what is the role of object *y* in *x*?" (*x* here being the culture, or parts of it). The decisive point here is that this method only makes sense when a work has reached a critical mass of reception communications since it would not otherwise be possible to detect its impact, and any claim to the latter would remain entirely speculative (cf. Latour 53). This is why it is such a promising approach to popular series like *The Wire* and *Grand Theft Auto*, which have spawned enormous amounts of commentary from academics, journalists, lay audiences, the producers themselves, and so forth. There is less and less to gain from adding yet another (ultimately partial) reading and, in the face of the sheer amount of frequently conflicting analyses, there is little reason to believe one will ever arrive at the definitive (read: consensus) interpretation. Conversely, it is precisely because of this rich and varied body of communications that it becomes possible to identify and trace ideas, assumptions, logics, etc., that may be at work across different accounts, thus amounting to insights into the culture surrounding the object, which are triggered by the latter as it prompts various agents to act. In this way, I am able to track instances of playing American as well as their reproductive effects on American culture.

On to the second side of this chapter's relation to Kelleter's study: how it differs. The first, and most obvious, difference stems from the respective objects of study themselves: *The Wire* is not *Grand Theft Auto*, and vice versa. The two differ in many ways: the distinct aesthetics and affordances of a serial television program are not the same as those of a series of videogames; *The Wire*'s narrower target audience (after all, "It's not TV, it's HBO") stands in contrast to the overwhelming mainstream success of *Grand Theft Auto*, each new installment of which usually dominates sales rankings for months if not years; *The Wire*'s undoubted standing as quintessential Quality TV is a long way from *Grand Theft Auto*'s contested status oscillating between artistic masterpiece and epitome of moral decay; both represent different types of seriality, an ongoing serial narrative in *The Wire* versus a loosely (and mainly structurally) connected succession

of self-sufficient videogames in *Grand Theft Auto*; both offer different kinds of complexity, leading to disparate aesthetic experiences (laborious viewing practices for narrative comprehension in *The Wire* versus easily accessible yet nearly endlessly varied, if somewhat repetitive, gameplay and world exploration in *Grand Theft Auto*); and more. Hence, Kelleter's approach cannot be mapped identically onto *Grand Theft Auto*. To put it differently: it makes sense to adopt the method itself (for reasons explained before), but it has to be slightly adjusted to cater to both the different affordances of the videogames and to their distinct discourse, which naturally takes a different shape than the one on *The Wire*. For these reasons alone, the outcomes will be specific to the objects examined. In the end, we will be able to see the cultural work performed by *Grand Theft Auto*, what it makes others do as the developers, the videogames themselves, and the players are playing American. Should there be intersections with the cultural work of *The Wire*, as there may well be, this might tell us something interesting about American culture, too.

Despite relying on a similar variety of accounts, ranging from producers to critics and everything in between, I refrain from employing terms like "self-descriptions" and "hetero-descriptions" as ordering devices grouping certain accounts together (Kelleter, *Serial* 2, 32); nor will I specifically investigate particular transactions between these two groups. In consequence, Niklas Luhmann's systems theory does not feature explicitly in this chapter (though his theses may well apply to some of my findings), not least because I believe that Latour's version of actor-network-theory itself, if only implicitly, already accounts for the phenomena to which Kelleter applies his systems-theoretical vocabulary. But such terminological quibbles are ultimately not very productive, so I leave it at this.

Finally, I trace the agencies active in the actor-network of *Grand Theft Auto* beyond the series' production and reception back into its latest installment, *GTA V*, released in 2013. This is done through a reading of the title's ambioperative gameworld, so the significance of the gameworld's ambient operations becomes fully apparent in this section. Although not carried out in Kelleter's book, this is a logical step that organically follows a serious application of a Latour-inspired method. The agencies at work flow at, into, through, out of, around, and certainly also inside the videogames. As Latour writes, "an actor-network is what is made to act by a large star-shaped web of mediators flowing in and out of it" (217). This move back into *GTA V* makes sense especially because of the kind of seriality *Grand Theft Auto* constitutes: It is not an ongoing serial narrative that ends at some point, but a more loosely connected set of individual texts (which means all the more that it could end at any time, but such an abrupt ending would never run the risk of failing to provide narrative closure simply because it is not necessary for the series). Hence, contrary to *The Wire*, most published communications

on the series (regardless of their mode) focus only on one particular title, seldom a selection of several of them, and hardly any discuss the series as a whole – which, at this point, is still running – in any substantial way. Since the bulk of, especially academic, writing on *Grand Theft Auto* concerns the first four 3D installments – *GTA III*, *Vice City*, *San Andreas*, and *GTA IV*, all released between 2001 and 2008 – it should be possible to identify the major agencies active in and around those games and then trace how they act upon *GTA V* in its gameworld. Hence, *GTA V* provokes the curious case of examining both the videogame itself and some of the accounts written about it.

In terms of the concrete method employed to identify the agencies at work, my inquiry aims to "feed off controversies" (Latour 25). This is to say that, even as one can find countless, often quite disparate, and occasionally conflicting readings in the vast array of communications on *Grand Theft Auto*, some of them will nonetheless draw on the same common understandings, employ the same vocabulary, or simply highlight similar concerns of the games. These shared centers of attraction then become somewhat stable assemblages that allow me to make observations about the things *Grand Theft Auto* does, in the sense of causing others to act in particular ways. This also provides the solution to a problem not even raised yet: how to decide *what* is important in *which* accounts? And what if an essential one is missed? Regarding this conundrum, Latour writes that "if agencies are innumerable, *controversies* about agency have a nice way of ordering themselves" (52). This has two major implications. First, certain topical clusters emerge more or less automatically across a given set of accounts – the more accounts covered, the more stable these clusters presumably become – and the concerns of each cluster can be argued to be "empirically real" in their actions and (Kelleter, *Serial* 4), therefore, significant in their meaning with regard to the object of study, in this case American culture. Second, it is not, in fact, necessary to cover all existing accounts and to fear that one could overlook the most crucial one since a) if an overlooked account contains an issue that is indeed salient, this issue is nonetheless registered through all the other accounts that address it, too, and b) if, conversely, a seemingly important account is the only one that talks about something, no associations can be traced, no action solidifies, and, hence, no substantial claim to its relevance for the larger assemblage called American culture can be made. The point may be meaningful and interesting (and thus worth examining) in itself, but it cannot conclusively be argued to have major dealings in the culture as the concept is understood in this chapter.

Because of the specific interest of this chapter and because of this book's general positioning as a contribution to the field of American studies, the associations traced in accounts of *Grand Theft Auto* here are restricted to those that concern or relate to American culture beyond the immanent qualities of the gameworlds

themselves. For example, even though there may be several accounts that highlight a certain game mechanic and thus perhaps collectively establish it as a new standard for videogames in general, thus shaping the field of videogames, such a formation is not necessarily recorded and examined in this chapter because it does not affect American culture as it is conceived here. On the other hand, if the mechanic were referenced repeatedly regarding its role in creating a convincing sense of America in the games – which presupposes assumptions about what this America is – these associations are registered and scrutinized since they now take part in (re)producing particular narratives about America, thus participating in the continuing proliferation of American culture.

To describe *Grand Theft Auto* as an actor-network, therefore, means to tackle several questions through the method described above: What does the *Grand Theft Auto* series *make others do* and, especially, talk about? What does it mean to its audience (at large) and what does this tell us about its role in American culture? What is thus produced in its reception? How do the agencies of this culture, in turn, continue to act in the world of *GTA V*? How does all of this constitute an example of the reproduction of American culture by playing American? In the following, I move – mainly successively, though jumps from one to the other occasionally occur due to their interactions – from accounts of *Grand Theft Auto*'s production to its reception and into the world of *GTA V*, reassembling the meaning(s) and culture(s) of *Grand Theft Auto* along the way.[6]

## 2.1 Pop Culture Thou Art, and unto Pop Culture Shalt Thou Return: The Agencies that Made *Grand Theft Auto*

As established before, this chapter is concerned with some of the ways in which American culture acts and is acted upon – how its existence, in fact, depends on actions. It is therefore worth going back, if only briefly, to the origins of *Grand Theft Auto* since its inception and subsequent dissemination as a brand/franchise/series are illuminative examples of the flows of cultural agencies and their capacities to set different actors into motion.

The basic premise of *Grand Theft Auto* is simple enough: players take on the roles of low-level criminals carrying out jobs – ranging from product deliveries to assassinations – for various figures of the criminal underworld. Gameplay takes

**6** This maxim plays on the titles of both Latour's introduction to ANT and a volume edited by Nate Garrelts, titled *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, which remains the only academic book devoted entirely to the *Grand Theft Auto* series, and which does not quite live up to its title's bold claim.

place in openly traversable, (mostly) urban gameworlds in which the player, who controls the playable character from a third-person perspective, is free to engage in every kind of activity the gameworld affords whenever they are not currently on a scripted mission. Each installment of *Grand Theft Auto* features different (though always predominately urban) settings, characters, and narratives, although some characters reappear in minor roles throughout different games. Depending on the individual title, the protagonist will either stay a foot soldier or move up the ranks to eventually command a criminal empire himself. Stylistically as well as aesthetically, the series has from the beginning presented its often brutal, and at times even gory, material in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, foregoing strict realism for an overdrawing of settings and characters and a generally parodic tone. With the exception of the expansion pack to the first game, *London 1969*, and *GTA 2*, which takes place in the future, all *Grand Theft Auto* titles employ American settings and reference points. While the specifics and ramifications of these settings are discussed in more detail later in this chapter, this creative decision is precisely where the agencies of American culture begin their work in this account.

Keeping in mind, as indicated earlier, that *Grand Theft Auto* was not created in the United States but in the United Kingdom (specifically Dundee, Scotland), it cannot be taken for granted that choosing America as the games' key reference point should occur naturally. Nonetheless, accounts of *GTA*'s development, as rare as they are, suggest the pull of American popular culture, particularly the fascination it exercised on some of the creative people behind the game, and the force it subsequently exerted on the series. The most comprehensive account of those early days can be found in David Kushner's journalistic investigation into the *Grand Theft Auto* phenomenon and the creators behind it, published in the book *Jacked: The Unauthorised Behind-the-Scenes Story of* Grand Theft Auto.

During the time when the videogame that would subsequently start the series was developed, two decisions proved crucial in planting the seeds of what was to become a global pop cultural phenomenon: the core principle and the setting of the videogame. After rising to fame with the immensely successful *Lemmings*, David Jones – then one of the most renowned game designers in the world – and his company DMA Design began working on the idea of a top-down-view racing game set in a detailed simulation of a city, complete with traffic patterns, pedestrians, and penalties for the violation of rules. The game carried the working title *Race 'n' Chase* and was intended to follow the principle of cops and robbers because, according to Jones, it was "a natural rule set that everybody understands" (qtd. in Kushner 25). While the simulation's details were astonishing for its time, "[t]here was just one problem: the game kind of sucked" (Kushner 26). Not only was it boring to play by the rules in this miniature world, but it was also actually immensely difficult to do so while maintaining the goal of fast-paced action. For

example, in a cops and robbers game, the accidental running over of pedestrians, which would happen frequently due to the pace of the gameplay, obviously had to be punished by the game. This conundrum led to the first big step in eventually creating *GTA*, as Kushner recounts:

> *Race 'n' Chase* hit a road block. There was just no way to have a fast and furious arcade-style game while playing by the rules. The DMAers stared at the screen, as the cars and the people raced around. Maybe there was another solution, they realized. Instead of having to avoid all of the pedestrians, what if you got points for running them over? What if you were the bad guy instead? (29)

Consequently, they flipped the concept on its head and made the protagonist a criminal who had to run from the police after each job, with each new crime – such as killing innocent bystanders – resulting in points for the player. In other words: "Instead of cops and robbers, the game became robbers and cops" (Kushner 30). From this point onward, playing on the other side of the law and generating an enjoyable videogame experience from transgressing moral boundaries became the trademark principle of the *Grand Theft Auto* series.

The more significant decision in the context of this chapter, however, concerns the specifics of the *GTA*'s setting and the narrative framing of its gameplay. Once the concept was set, the publisher BMG Interactive, and especially Sam Houser, were excited for what the game could eventually become and they supported DMA in toying around with ways in which to make it as entertaining as possible. According to Kushner, this created the space necessary for (American) popular culture to leave its mark on what was to become *Grand Theft Auto*: "With so much freedom to play and design *Race 'n' Chase*, anything was game. The developers included references to *Reservoir Dogs*, James Bond films, *The Getaway*, and chase scenes from the *French Connection*" (Kushner 32). Already leaning toward American popular culture more than British or continental, the important detail here is that all of these references were implemented *as* references and thus went beyond the more general cultural influence to which all cultural production is subject. This is a conscious effort on the part of the developers to connect their videogame to a body of works that not only deal with professional criminals in one way or another but that form part of the larger assemblage of American popular culture.

This urge continued to influence *Grand Theft Auto* in the years to come, especially when the technology of the PlayStation 2 enabled the move to 3D graphics with *GTA III*, which its creators wanted to be the next rung on the evolutionary ladder of an iconic American genre: "By marrying *GTA* with PS2, Sam [Houser] had a new mission with which to push their games: 'to make the first interactive gangster movie,' as he said" (Kushner 82). Houser's intention speaks not only to a

more general "cinema envy" that has long plagued mainstream videogames (Zimmerman 125) – particularly during the 2000s, after the 3D revolution – but especially to *Grand Theft Auto*'s creators' desire to create something that could stand alongside the globally dominant American popular culture even though it was produced in the United Kingdom. Subsequent games in the series continued to openly evoke ionic films and pop music from the eras they aimed to capture, using this intertextual strategy to position themselves in a lineage of American popular culture, self-fashioning the series as a rightful heir to this cultural heritage. Particularly *Vice City*, with is parallels to *Scarface* and a soundtrack that ran the gamut from Toto to Michael Jackson and from Bryan Adams to Kim Wilde, and *San Andreas*, with its reminiscence of *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society* and its all-star lineup of west coast gangster rap from N.W.A. to 2Pac, forcefully tried to paint a pop culture-inflected image of the mid-1980s and early 1990s, respectively. Generally, because these are videogames whose gameplay for the largest part consists of driving, the series' major ambient operation, in-game radio – with a mix of fictional advertisements, talk shows, and licensed music tracks (cf. Miller, "Jacking" 404) – has become one of the major carriers of cultural meaning in the series at least since *GTA III* and has therefore been one of the key devices to create gaming experiences that feel genuinely American. The creators of one of the most successful videogame franchises in history, then, have been playing American from the very beginning.

The second aspect to the flow of American culture into this British videogame in the making concerns the locations of its settings. The intertextual references discussed above themselves were references of a narrative kind, particular constellations of established tropes, so they could just as well have worked in a non-American setting. Nonetheless, the fictional cities included in *GTA* – Liberty City, Vice City, and San Andreas – specifically drew on the American cities of New York City, Miami, and San Francisco, and very openly so. According to Kushner's research, the reason for this was, at least partly, a commercial one. He explains how "the newfangled *Race 'n' Chase* seemed like more than just a game. It was, most important, a world. The game takes place within three fictional cities, each modeled after a real town. Jones, the savy entrepreneur, wanted to choose cities that would have the most impact on the market – and that meant the United States" (32). I return to this point in more detail in a later section of this chapter, but what one can witness here is how the international dominance of American popular culture in terms of salability critically affects a decisive creative decision for a work produced elsewhere and with no material ties to the United States. Even *GTA*'s publisher BMG Interactive, as a subdivision of Germany-based media corporation Bertelsmann, one of the biggest players in the global media market, was thoroughly European.

Viewing the artistic decisions surrounding *GTA* recounted above from an actor-network perspective, one can see how American popular culture exerts its

agency upon the game, how it "mak[es] some difference to a state of affairs" (Latour 52). Without the reach and influence of American popular culture, particularly gangster films and their relatives, *GTA* would arguably have turned out a very different videogame; and without the allure of America in the global entertainment market, *Grand Theft Auto* would not have subscribed to imagining and portraying decidedly American cities which, despite being entirely fictive, have proven to be impressively recognizable, as I discuss in more detail later.

In terms of the videogames themselves, the product itself remains, strictly speaking, non-American in that it paints a picture of the United States through a British lens. "Presented are a series of American clichés, packaged, marketed, and sold back to us," as Murray aptly summarizes ("High" 91). What she means is that these are not merely portraits of the United States dreamed up by Brits but that the ideas, characters, tropes, etc., that are depicted here originate in American popular culture and, after their international reception, have now found their way back to the United States. As Kiri Miller describes it,

> Rockstar's versions of New York, Miami, L.A., San Francisco, and Las Vegas are colored by European perspectives on American mass culture and consumerism. Britishness occasionally bleeds through the games' American facades: a fake pop song in *GTA III* includes the line "She swings her hips and her bits to the rock 'n' roll groove," injured characters spend time "in hospital," a *San Andreas* character has a washing machine under his kitchen counter, and the *San Andreas* instruction booklet refers to the "glitz and glamour [*sic*]" of Las Venturas/Las Vegas. ("Jacking" 409)

Murray's and Miller's observations here are on point; *Grand Theft Auto* is, of course, a collage of American popular culture created by Brits in the United Kingdom. Yet from the point of view taken in this chapter, this matters only in so far as it allows us to witness the agency of American culture, in the figuration of works of popular culture, as it flows into the creative process of a popular entertainment product incorporating parts of this culture, and subsequently reproducing it as it prompts hundreds of millions of players around the globe to play American.

This selling American clichés back to Americans, as Murray would perhaps put it, however, does not mark the end of the flows traced here, the ways American culture exerts agency both upon and through *Grand Theft Auto*. As the series enters American popular culture and is eventually taken up and referenced in other forms, the flows described here come full circle. Again, *GTA III* can be viewed as the watershed, the moment *Grand Theft Auto* genuinely becomes 'American.' Kushner recounts how the game began to leave its marks outside the realm of videogames: "*GTA III* permeated the culture at large, just as Sam [Houser] had always dreamed. The shout-outs on the *Daily Show*. Mix-tapes in New York with *GTA* sound bites. Even ecstasy pills allegedly floating around clubs with the Rockstar logo, not a company PR campaign but simply an act of love, it seemed, from fans"

(103). By the time *Vice City* was released, "[i]t had become a badge of hipness to wear a T-shirt with the company's logo or to blast *Vice City*'s nine-CD box soundtrack (a packaging coup unheard of in the game business) in your car" (129). *Grand Theft Auto* had become so pervasive that it "was parodied on *Chappelle's Show* and name-checked on a hip-hop track by rapper Cam'ron" while "New York disc jockeys Opie and Anthony began to effuse about *Vice City* on the air each day" (129). From this point onward, the series never ceased spilling into popular culture.

This process has only spread further with each new part of *Grand Theft Auto*, to the point where the series' aesthetics have become a reference point itself. An interesting example of this development could be witnessed in the spring of 2016, when US rapper and singer Drake released his album *Views*. Upon seeing the accompanying visual artwork of the album, many fans immediately related it to *Grand Theft Auto* and noted how closely the artwork reproduced the aesthetic of the videogames' famous loading screens (Zelindo), which feature alternating still images from settings and characters in the game in a stylized comic panel aesthetic displayed to the sound of an atmospheric soundtrack. Some then even went on to cut the images of Drake's artwork together in a slideshow reminiscent of the loading screens and added the music from *GTA V*'s loading screen, so that the resemblance became undeniable.

As this brief excursion into the cultural history of *Grand Theft Auto* shows, American culture is at work all throughout the process, up to the point where it begins to be worked upon itself. *Grand Theft Auto* is what it is because of the influence of American popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, which caused the series' creators to play American early on, a practice they continue to engage in to this day. At the same time, the series has grown to become a productive actor itself, one that has begun to have an effect on the very culture that created it. This effect, in turn, goes beyond being referenced in other works or by other actors in American popular culture. Arriving at the core contribution of this chapter, the following pages demonstrate how the *Grand Theft Auto* series works on American culture in the ways it makes a variety of people talk not only about the videogames but, especially, also about particular aspects of this culture, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly through the way they speak about certain matters. As becomes apparent throughout the next sections, this is where *Grand Theft Auto* reproduces American culture in its own right.

## 2.2 What We Talk About When We Talk About *Grand Theft Auto*: Matters of Concern and Narratives About America

Few videogames have polarized as much as those of the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Celebrated by players for their magnificent and lively open worlds and free-form gameplay, vilified by parents and politicians for their excessive depictions of violence and sexual themes (among others), and both lauded and critiqued by academics for their representational politics, each new installment in the series has been a hot topic of conversation. In the academy, it has inspired the "the first academic book to focus explicitly on a single game series" (Garrelts, "Introduction" 2), and in the gaming community, it has produced a thriving online fan culture around discussion boards like GTAForums and databases like the GTA Wiki. Much has been said, therefore, about the series in the two decades since its inception, especially after *GTA III* ushered in a new era in 2001 – arguably, not only of the series itself but also of videogames in general, as we shall see later. Academic discussions of *Grand Theft Auto* range from their gameplay mechanics to their storytelling, from their use of intertextual references to their simulations of the urban, from their exploitation of stereotypes to their poignant satirical commentary, and more. Accounts of the games amount to a sheer unfathomable corpus of texts, a plethora of voices and judgments often at odds with each other, whether due to disparate topical investments or diametrically opposed interpretations.

Yet, as indicated earlier, tracking the actions – meaning: communicative practices – set in motion by *Grand Theft Auto* within the larger system we call American culture is not tantamount to recounting each and every reaction to it. Instead, if we take an understanding of culture seriously as an ongoing, dynamic formation sustained by action, then only those texts that form robust associations through their particular "repetition and variation of narratives" can be argued to amount to a (temporarily) somewhat stable formation in this ongoing flux of cultural practices (Kelleter, "From" 99), something that leaves behind the "*traces*" that make American culture "visible" (Latour 8); if an account does not make such connections, it vanishes in the turmoil. This is not to claim that such an unassociated account would be meaningless in itself or in its relation to the game it concerns, only that it does not participate in the reproduction of American culture facilitated by *Grand Theft Auto* as it is described here. In surveying the myriad writings on *Grand Theft Auto*, then, particular "*matters of concern*" emerge, that is, "*gatherings*" formed by the diverse agencies of numerous accounts connecting to each other in various ways (Latour 114). This becomes clearer when performed rather than explained in the abstract, so in the following, I identify what I consider three dominant matters of concern, distributed unequally in terms of their extent: *Grand Theft Auto* as a paradigm shift, *Grand Theft Auto*'s

dealings in social reality, and *Grand Theft Auto*'s implication in the mythicized mediation of American cities. The second of these subsumes two distinct but interconnected figurations – structural racism and neoliberal capitalism – that arguably undergird and, at times, dominate much of the discourse around *Grand Theft Auto*.

### 2.2.1 Art, Attention, and Attitudes: Shifting Paradigms

The first matter of concern to be considered in this section stands out since it does not relate as tidily to a single way of reading *Grand Theft Auto* as the ones to follow. It takes shape, rather, as several, originally disconnected engagements with the games, diverse in their goals and approaches, converge to amount to a larger phenomenon best described as a paradigm shift concerning how videogames are perceived and talked about in the United States and the role that *Grand Theft Auto* played in this change. Principally, the shift, which took place during the first decade of the new millennium, comprised three main strands: the breakdown of the public view that videogames are for children, the acknowledgment that videogames constitute a cultural form worthy of serious consideration, and (consequently, one could say) a rise of expectations about the role of videogames in society.

An important fact about *Grand Theft Auto* to start with is the following: all of the series' titles since *GTA III* were rated M (mature) by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board in the United States, meaning that they should not be sold to or played by anyone under the age of seventeen, which is voluntarily enforced by American retailers ("ESRB Ratings"); the first edition of the PC version of *San Andreas* is a notable exception as its rating was changed to AO (adults only) after the Hot Coffee Mod, which included a mini sex game, surfaced (Thorsen). *Grand Theft Auto*'s consistent rating as at least "mature" is essential for comprehending the videogames' impact on the American public and its understanding of videogames at large because much of the large-scale public controversies around the series in the first half of the 2000s was framed by politicians and conservative activists under concerns about the games' influence on children.

Most (in)famous in this regard is former attorney Jack Thompson's long-lasting crusade – including countless lawsuits against game developers and retailers – against videogames with violent and sexual content in general and particularly the *Grand Theft Auto* games, which (alongside *Manhunt*, another notoriously violent game by Rockstar) he famously called "murder simulators" (Vitka). Thompson repeatedly blamed teenage killing sprees on these games, which, in his view, teach and inspire children and teenagers to inflict violence upon others, all the way to

ruthlessly killing them. Similar sentiments were echoed by politicians who picked up the matter, especially after the appearance of the *San Andreas* Hot Coffee Mod added explicit sexual interaction as gameplay to the issue of violence. At the forefront of political endeavors to censor videogames were figures like then-Senators Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), the latter of whom had already been a leading figure in the Senate hearings of the early 1990s that eventually led to the Video Game Rating Act and the establishment of the ESRB (Kohler).

As with earlier controversies, much of the political debate operated on the logic that videogames are for children, that children are originally innocent, and that they are corrupted by bad influences like violent videogames. David Leonard recounts one of the successful endeavors at stricter regulation and how it was discursively framed:

> In Illinois, Governor Blagojevich (D-IL) led the first and most successful effort to regulate virtual reality. In fact, Governor Rod Blagojevich was the first public official to call for legislation that would make it illegal for anyone under the age of eighteen to buy violent or sexually explicit games: "This is all about protecting our children until they are old enough to protect themselves," the Governor stated in an issued statement. "There's a reason why we don't let kids smoke or drink alcohol or drive a car until they reach a certain age and level of maturity." ("Virtual Gangstas" 52)

Several points are interesting here. First, all of this follows the release of *San Andreas*, and more specifically the discovery of the Hot Coffee Mod, which means that it is clearly the sexual rather than the violent content that suddenly calls for action, even as the controversies around *GTA III*'s and *Vice City*'s violence had already happened. Another side to this is, furthermore, how videogame violence suddenly becomes an issue again as players increasingly take on the roles of criminals, oftentimes of ethnic minorities, as opposed to the publicly sanctioned violence carried out in military-themed games. For a pointed discussion of these implications and their relation to a common, not only racial but racist, imaginary, see Leonard ("Virtual Gangstas" 50–56). Second, the proposed solution merely raises the age threshold by a single year (most of the videogames in question were M-rated, some even AO already) and formally transforms an already existing and voluntarily enforced recommendation into a compulsory one, arguably a small difference in practice. Third, the view that it is mainly children who play videogames still strongly informs the entire incentive for the legislation since these videogames are explicitly targeted at mature audiences and marketed accordingly, yet the core assumption driving such legislation is that children, not adults, predominately buy and play these games. Fourth, a particularly American, skewed view of which age (read: level of maturity) is necessary to responsibly engage in certain practices shows through here: teenagers are expected to responsibly handle one of the deadliest technologies of our time – the car – while being

denied the capacity to deal with sexual and (to a lesser degree) violent media representations. Kushner recounts one especially bizarre example of this, which needs no further commentary: "'It's outrageous,' [California state assemblyman and Democrat Leland] Yee said. 'It tells you how to copulate a woman. That should not be in the hands of children'" (209). By now, with *GTA V*'s level of detail, scenes of sexual interaction with prostitutes in the videogame are far more explicit than the Hot Coffee Mod, while admittedly being less interactive.

While public controversies about violence have accompanied videogames from their early stages – beginning with *Death Race* in 1976 – *Grand Theft Auto* marks a watershed because it appears to mark the end game in the emancipation of videogames as a form of culture in the public perception, caused by the collision of two oppositional conceptualizations of videogames: the general public's association of videogames with toys and, therefore, children and Rockstar Games' ambition to make games explicitly for adult audiences and to elevate the medium to a level on a par with film (Kushner 79).

The association of videogames with toys and childhood goes back to a history of the degradation of play as opposed to reason and labor – tantamount to adulthood – during the modernization and industrialization of the Western world (Kirkpatrick 44–45). Adult play, such as gambling, in turn became marked by "a shadow of disapproval and suspicion" in modernity (47). As the first computer games were introduced to the public, they were placed in bars and arcade halls, adult environments, thus clearly defying any association with children yet at the same time assuming the illicit connotations associated with those places. When these games finally entered the home sphere from the mid-1970s onward, however, they were generally perceived as toys rather than serious entertainment (Kirkpatrick 56). This double logic of adult play as illicit and computer games as toys forestalled any possibility for videogames to be accepted as a legitimate cultural form all the way to the end of the millennium. Needless to say, there were as many milestone games in the history of videogames that were clearly targeted at adult audiences, either in terms of their themes or their complexity, as there were those appropriate for a wider age range. Yet for the longest time, this did not play a significant role in public discourse. Having a sense of this framing of videogames in the American public is important to understand the context *Grand Theft Auto* entered, especially after the release of *GTA III*.

Rockstar Games' goal with taking *Grand Theft Auto* to 3D on the PlayStation 2, which continued for all subsequent installments on ever more powerful gaming technologies, was to create videogames that provide compelling experiences of serious, adult-oriented themes on the order of those provided by film. According to Dan Houser, at the center of *Grand Theft Auto*'s motivation stood "[t]he idea that games could be made that were as culturally relevant as films or anything else.

That there was this huge audience of people who play console games in particular and who were very culturally savvy and culturally aware, but who were being fed content when playing games they found slightly demeaning" (Morris). Originally, film was the cultural form Rockstar Games aspired to with *Grand Theft Auto* (cf. Kushner 82); even after *GTA IV*, Dan Houser would still say, "[w]e regard our competition in the world of characterization and storytelling and cultural relevance as being alongside movies rather than some of the other games" (Morris). Yet their confidence in the possibilities of their medium soon led to higher aspirations. Whereas convincing, cinematic storytelling in action games was nothing new at this point – the critically-acclaimed *Half-Life*, for example, had already been published only a year after the first *GTA* – the makers of *Grand Theft Auto* felt they were creating something never seen before. For Sam Houser, they did not merely create interactive movies but something better, as Kushner describes:

> He wasn't merely watching a movie, he was inside it – and this realization made him feel as if he'd never be able to watch a movie the same way again. Games weren't about one person's authorial vision. They were stories told by a new generation of creators and players in a language all their own. "To me, as a film nut, there was something about *GTA III* that just drew a line in the sand between games and movies," Sam recalled, "and it felt like this is us taking over now." (88)

These were works of culture that, in the eyes of the Rockstar Games executives, were "meant for a new generation" (Kushner 96).

The player's implication in the on-screen narrative that Sam Houser invokes, the focus on a life of crime and violence (and sex), and the persistent public image of videogames as toys rather than a legitimate form of cultural expression, all these points converged in the controversies surrounding *Grand Theft Auto*. The American public's framework for understanding videogames was consequently challenged to the point of crisis in the face of what was quickly becoming not only one of the best-selling media products in history but a popular culture phenomenon that, as sketched out before, spilled over into other cultural spheres, from music to television (Kushner 103, 129). This new medium, considered child's play for the longest time, was doing things it should not have been (capable of) doing, according to public opinion. The people at Rockstar Games, however, were absolutely aware that this was the reason why their creation was constantly under fire, as Dan Houser's rant during an interview in 2008 exemplifies:

> If this was a movie or TV show and was the best in its field, you'd give it loads of awards and put those awards shows on television. I genuinely don't aspire to that, but I do aspire to not being called an asshole for doing the same thing in a videogame. So what you're really saying is, "It's not the content, it's the medium." You've proven that by your actions in other

> areas. So what is it about the medium you don't like? Because maybe we should challenge those ideas. It's not what you think it is to a lot of people. (qtd. in Morris)

While this crisis was not resolved once and for all at any particular point, one can argue that, in less than a decade, between the releases of *GTA III* and *GTA IV*, the way the American public discussed videogames did change considerably.

In her essay "From Stompin' Mushrooms to Bustin' Heads: *Grand Theft Auto III* as Paradigm Shift," Laurie N. Taylor argues that it was specifically *GTA III* that led to a paradigm shift, both in terms of gameplay design and public perception of videogames. While the former is certainly true and while *GTA III* is undeniably a milestone and watershed moment in gaming, I would argue it was not quite as influential on its own regarding the latter. This is evidenced already by all the controversies around its sequels that followed, which continued to operate under the same logics as those around *GTA III*. It seems more accurate, therefore, to locate the paradigm shift in a longer time span and to attribute it to the *Grand Theft Auto* series at large (and alongside other games). Forced to confront the uselessness of the old framework (cf. L. Taylor 121), America slowly began to conceive of videogames as a mature form of cultural expression in its own right. Henry Jenkins describes this as the point "when the medium begins to spread outward and attract more adults while the public still perceives it as mostly a children's medium. *Grand Theft Auto III* was made, marketed, and rated for adults, but parents don't know the game can be for adults" (qtd. in Walker). *Grand Theft Auto* did not effect this change singlehandedly, but it was always at the forefront; each new game of the series during this time went through the same trials and pushed against the same outdated conceptions until they eventually gave way. Other games came and went, producing similar effects – Ion Storm's *Deus Ex*, Team Ico's *Shadow of the Colossus*, and 2K Games' *BioShock* are only some of many examples – but *Grand Theft Auto* stood through it all and was present whenever and wherever the perception of videogames notably (and lastingly) changed.

To the people who made *Grand Theft Auto*, there was never any doubt that their videogames were nothing less than art. As Rockstar Games co-founder Jamie King put it: "We're an art house! We're an art collective!" (qtd. in Kushner 67). But the American public was only beginning to seriously entertain the question of whether videogames were art in the early 2000s. Whereas the establishment – academics and other critics more attached to 'traditional' literature, film, television, and other visual art – remained skeptical, others began making the case for taking videogames seriously *as art*. At this point, videogames were already being discussed in the academy by an increasing number of scholars from various fields – the time frame I address in this section overlaps, not coincidentally, with the emergence of a distinct, more organized, and internationally dispersed research field of

game studies (L. Taylor 122). One of the pioneers on a more public level was Jenkins, then professor at MIT. In 2000, a year after he had testified before Congress on the matter of media violence and defended videogames and other forms of popular culture from untenable accusations (Jenkins, "Congressional"), Jenkins published an article with the title "Art Form for the Digital Age," which began with the words: "Video games shape our culture. It's time we took them seriously" ("Art" 117). Jenkins insisted that "[c]omputer games are art – a popular art, an emerging art, a largely unrecognized art, but art nevertheless" ("Art" 117), comparing the stage of videogames at this point with the breakthrough of cinema in the early twentieth century. While Jenkins is writing a year before the release of *GTA III* and while he does not mention the franchise in this article – games he does mention include *Final Fantasy* and *Tomb Raider* – the connection to the history of cinema is exactly where *Grand Theft Auto* enters the picture soon after. A little later, Jenkins specifically compares *GTA III* to D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* – unfortunately only considering the cultural significance of Griffith's film on a formal level and not addressing its inherent racism and its role in the reinvigoration of the Ku Klux Klan (cf. Franklin 430–33) – in terms of what both did for their medium and how they ushered in new eras as they pushed their media toward maturation. He explains: "If it's 1910 and you ask, 'What's the state of movies?,' I'm going to say mostly chases and pie fights. By 1915, when D. W. Griffith makes *Birth of a Nation*, now I'm saying that this is a mature storytelling medium that has enormous power to shape the debates within our culture" (qtd. in Bogost, *Persuasive* viii). Jenkins explains that, "[i]n terms of what it does for games as a medium, *Grand Theft Auto III* is an enormous step forward . . . . It represents a totally different model of how games can tell stories and what you can do in a gamespace" (qtd. in Walker). The implication here is not only that *GTA III* moves its own medium to another stage but that, as a consequence, videogames as a form are elevated to a higher cultural standing, even art.

Although classificatory questions like "Are video games art?" are inherently uninteresting because they yield little epistemic merit (besides being virtually unresolvable), and despite film critic Roger Ebert's (in)famous declaration that "video games can never be art" (cf. Parker), the connection between videogames and art continued to linger, and it lingered with *Grand Theft Auto* in particular. It shows in instances like Murray referring to art twice in the title of her essay "High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing *Grand Theft Auto*." It is apparent when other artists call the videogames art, such as Tom Sachs asserting that *Grand Theft Auto* "is the most important artwork of our time" (Goldstein). It features in assessments like Farhad Manjoo's review of *GTA IV* claiming that it "elevates 'GTA' from mere entertainment into something that can credibly, if a little self-consciously, demand to be called art." It even informs accounts that fundamen-

tally disagree with such statements, like the contribution to the *Wall Street Journal* by Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winner Junot Díaz, who, referring to *GTA IV*, "[has] no doubt that it is art" but does not consider it "successful art." It is at work in the comparison drawn, for example, between *GTA IV*'s depiction of the American city and – lo and behold – *The Wire* (Manjoo), and even more so in the praise for the Housers as they made the 2009 *Time* 100: "The Housers are doing the work of Tom Wolfe, creating tapestries of modern times as detailed as those of Balzac or Dickens" (Selman). In the latter, moreover, the little thought experiment from the beginning of this chapter comes full circle: *Grand Theft Auto*, it seems, could indeed be regarded as a serious contender for the Great American Novel as its depictions of America are likened to the great realist novelists of the nineteenth century.

All of those instances of recognition, and even the debates about whether games are art or not, demonstrate that something in the way games are talked about changed during the 2000s, and the fact that *Grand Theft Auto* turns up again and again, to the extent that it could be considered the single most consistent (and persisting) force in this transformation, testifies to the crucial role of the franchise for American culture's relation to videogames in general. It is no coincidence that articles on *Grand Theft Auto* are often the ones that bring videogames to the attention of established academic fields that formerly would not have engaged with them, such as Murray's publication of "High Art/Low Life" in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. And it is, likewise, no coincidence, that *Grand Theft Auto* is the franchise that showcases to a field not usually oriented toward videogames how these can take over long-standing cultural functions like folklore, as K. Miller's contribution to the *Journal of American Folklore*, "Grove Street Grimm: *Grand Theft Auto* and Digital Folklore," exemplifies. In the end, it does not matter whether videogames are art; what matters is that they are now acknowledged as a form of culture worthy of serious attention in their own right, attention that goes beyond moral panic and elitist condescension. Dan Houser himself describes this shift like this: "There was a sense that in some way movies were a higher art form and video games could aspire to be like them . . . . I think now, because we and a few other companies are making products, that this isn't the case. They're just different and video games are capable of things that movies aren't" (qtd. in Cowen).

Finally, the shifting paradigm shows where one may least suspect it – in those accounts that vehemently criticize *Grand Theft Auto*. Paul Barrett, for example, laments that *San Andreas* does not offer any visions for how to challenge the world it depicts, which he reads as reinforcing neoliberal and racist ideologies, and he ends on an account of the stakes involved in critical work like his:

> These criticisms understood, the question remains, what can be done? First, critical analysis of cultural texts such as *San Andreas* is essential to understanding the very real pedagogical and political work that these texts do. *San Andreas* is both extremely fun and extremely popular, and the notion that it is somehow below the radar of acceptable critical analysis simply by virtue of it being popular or vulgar misses an important opportunity for critical, public intervention. This sort of analysis, where questions of representation and politics are taken very seriously, and understood within a specific context, are all the more important when the text being considered is so immediately relevant. After all, this is a text which is being 'read' by a great number of people, most of whom are outside academia, and more importantly, it is a text that generates meaning. It actively constructs a worldview that has implications in the larger, political sphere. With this in mind, speaking back to the text, and offering a critique of how it constructs these meanings seems crucial to any public intellectual work. (115)

To complement this with a second example, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, too, complain that "there is nonetheless a manifestly reactionary aspect to *GTA*'s vision of universal corruption. What is excluded from its virtuality is any alternative to the rottenness" (180). What is interesting in both of these passages is that, despite both texts' harsh criticisms of *Grand Theft Auto*, both operate on the shared assumption – shared also with the games' proponents – that videogames are indeed a potentially influential form of culture. Barrett's beef is less with the form than with the particular specimen that is *San Andreas*; the conviction that videogames matter and that they demand serious study not only remains but is actively reiterated. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter go even further: they blame the games for what they could be but, unfortunately, fail to be. This testifies to a belief that videogames as a form of cultural expression should offer alternative visions for a society in gridlock, that they have the potential to contribute to change for the better but that they simply do not yet use it. Again, the *Grand Theft Auto* games are not the only ones subjected to these kinds of criticisms; but the fact that they are always among those discussed in such ways indicates their central role in new attitudes toward videogames as a form to be taken seriously. Their popularity is, arguably, part of the story, but not every hugely popular videogame is held to the same standards or discussed in similar ways.

In summary, *Grand Theft Auto* can be viewed as marking a paradigm shift in the way in which videogames are viewed by and discussed in the American public. Not only were the videogames essential actors in forcing the public to realize that videogames are not just for kids, which they never really were in the first place. They also appear instrumental in a changing perception of videogames as a form of culture worthy of serious study, whether considered legitimate art or not. The force with which some criticize the lack of alternative practices offered or suggested by the videogames indicates, furthermore, that these people actually see an enormous potential and persuasive power in the form of the videogame,

which the respective titles simply do not utilize in the way required to effect positive societal change. Through the three distinct but parallel – and, ultimately, converging – developments sketched out in this section, *Grand Theft Auto* changed the way America talks about videogames.

### 2.2.2 "We can pick the game, but we cannot change the rules": Dealings in Social Reality

The second matter of concern that needs to be addressed with regard to *Grand Theft Auto* is the least surprising one since it is a staple of many fields of scholarship devoted to the study of aesthetic objects. In this kind of reading, certain representations in the object are related to specific social conditions in the real world, presuming some kind of exchange between the two; this type of interpretation often takes the form of (representational) critique, which is not unlike (parts of) the project undertaken in the next chapter. Concerning *Grand Theft Auto*, the two major targets of these kinds of readings are the videogames' depictions of ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, and the videogames' employment of neoliberal capitalist logics.[7]

When a blockbuster videogame series puts a Black protagonist center stage and sets its virtual world in the urban communities of disadvantaged African Americans, intense reactions are guaranteed. This happened in 2004, when Rockstar released *San Andreas*, a game focusing on early 1990s gang culture on the American West Coast. In *San Andreas*, players take on the role of Carl Johnson (short: CJ), an African American former gangbanger drawn back into a life of crime years after he had originally left his hometown. While the game received much critical acclaim upon release and while the major public controversy about it – along with the usual condemnation of *Grand Theft Auto*'s excessively violent content – resulted from the discovery of a mini sex game hidden in the game code and unearthed by the now infamous Hot Coffee Mod, scholarship frequently turned to the videogame's focus on and representation of non-white urban communities. Verdicts on this matter, however, vary widely.

A common reading of *San Andreas* accuses the game of participating in and continuing a long-running tradition of racial stereotyping in American popular

7 This line is uttered by Dimitri Rascalov, a Russian mob kingpin in *GTA IV*, to Niko Bellic, the game's protagonist, early in the game: "You know, if there's one thing I have learned, it's that we must obey the rules of the game. We can pick the game, Niko Bellic, but we cannot change the rules."

culture that amounts to nothing less than racism and the reinforcement of white supremacy. Barrett, for example, argues that the videogame

> offers the player the opportunity to act out popular-culture fantasies of middle-class youths through the representation of poor, inner city, African-American existence. While the intentions of the game are primarily to offer a fun experience, which it undoubtedly does, there is a great deal of learning that goes on in playing the game. Both in the very structure of the game and within the subtext of *San Andreas*, there is a glamorizing, and even spectacularization of violence, a marking of young black bodies as disposable, an insistence on a culture of cynicism as well as a particular formation of African-American experience that is extremely problematic. (95)

There are several assumptions underlying this passage, some of which are immediately relevant in the context of *Grand Theft Auto*'s relation to race-related issues in the United States. The first sentence is already rife with these: The fantasies Barrett speaks of appear to originate in popular culture (which they do, as the first subchapter demonstrated), they circulate among a particular demographic (young people from middle-class backgrounds, which he generally appears to read as white in his article), and there are communities of poor African Americans living in urban neighborhoods which are represented in some form in *San Andreas*. Furthermore, the videogame's content is presumed to have some kind of effect on the outside world through a process of "learning."

Similar assumptions seem to be at work in Leonard's assessment of the game, which is partly concerned with "the ways in which these games deploy longstanding racialized stereotypes, how they offer primarily white suburbanites the opportunity to experience America's dangerous ghettos, and how they sanction and legitimize state violence" ("Virtual Gangstas" 50). Again, the stereotypes are already circulating, the presumed audience is white (this time of an unspecified age), and the existence of "dangerous ghettos" is presupposed. Interestingly, especially the contrast between the world depicted in the game and the social context of the implied user appear to be central in both Barrett's and Leonard's accounts, which is also evident in both of their respective titles: "White Thumbs, Black Bodies" and "Virtual Gangstas, Coming to a Suburban House near You." Barrett takes this thought further when he speaks of "racial slumming" (100), a sentiment that appears in varying forms throughout other accounts as well; in his piece for the *New York Times*, for example, Michel Marriott cites a concerned parent who argues that games like *San Andreas* "are nothing more than pixilated minstrel shows." Barrett explains the implications of the politics he identifies in the game:

> Questions of systemic discrimination and the everyday experiences of racism are of no relevance here. This ignoring of histories of discrimination and "accumulated advantages" of whiteness takes away the very language of understanding the relationship between power and race. In place of any political understanding of race is a particularly constructed 'black'

> aesthetic, suggesting that through the appropriation of these black styles, languages and postures, whites can experience African-American existence. In paying no attention to the impact that race has on both individual and collective political agency, *San Andreas* reinforces neoliberal ideologies in that it naturalizes the conditions in which the black characters are placed. (100)

Here the game is cast as complicit in the social structures it depicts as it is perceived to support them in the logics of its gameplay and narrative, thus highlighting the very existence of these structures.

Leonard likewise positions *San Andreas* in a larger discursive field of "new racism" ("Virtual Gangstas" 50). In his view, "these games reinforce dominant understandings of America's ghettos, blackness, and state control" and they "reduce America's ghettos and the bodies of color who inhabit these locales to spaces of danger and decay that necessitate state surveillance and regulation" ("Virtual Gangstas" 60). In what constitutes a rather bizarre turn in an otherwise cogent, politically engaged essay, Leonard furthermore detects what he perceives as "the game's reactionary political orientation" as he takes literally the content of the very obviously satirical in-game radio broadcasts: "In each instance, the game gives voices to white supremacist ideologies legitimized by the game's narrative and racialized representation, sanctioning the current course of state violence. *GTA:SA* is not simply teaching kids to be violent, but eliciting consent for the ways the state enacts violence on communities of color" ("Virtual Gangstas" 61). Reproducing bits of the program out of context, with no reference to their functioning alongside other broadcasts in the game and without consideration of their presentation in terms of tone and voice, Leonard (mis)quotes passages like this one: "Notice food lines are getting too long. Wonder why? 19 million illegal aliens are in this country. Most are in San Andreas" ("Virtual Gangstas" 61). Another one is: "Those of you, who are poor, should just stop whining. Enjoy it and sit back to do what you do best: watch TV" ("Virtual Gangstas" 61). Compare to the latter, for example, K. Miller's contextualizing (and accurately quoted) treatment of the same skit, in a passage prefaced by references to "the games' critical commentary" and "GTA's political voice" ("Jacking" 410). Miller describes the broadcast as an "ad [that] takes place at a book-tour event for a conservative self-help author, apparently in a football stadium or similar setting. The book, titled *Rags Are Riches*, purports to teach the poor how to appreciate their poverty. In the ad, the author tells a homeless man, 'Instead of complaining about being poor, enjoy it. Watch TV. Don't vote. Who cares?'" ("Jacking" 410). As Miller herself indicates in another article, the likes of Leonard, perhaps, "have made the mistake of the Lion in the story of the Signifying Monkey: they have taken a story literally when it should be read figuratively" ("Grove" 274). Regardless of Leonard missing the satire in the instances to which he refers, two

points are noteworthy here. First, the main concern is, again, that *San Andreas* becomes a handmaiden to forces predating and existing outside the game, rather than the game creating some new discourse. Second, the videogame is viewed to not only transmit ideas but to effectively influence its players in their views and dispositions, an assumption that is revisited in a later section in this chapter.

The perceived pedagogies of *San Andreas* are a central concern in most readings that view the game as reinforcing a racist discourse, including the *New York Times* contribution mentioned earlier. Anna Everett and S. Craig Watkins, for example, specifically scrutinize the game – alongside *Bully*, another title published by Rockstar – in their study of what they call "racialized pedagogical zones" (142). Regarding *Grand Theft Auto*, the authors argue that "these games draw heavily from racist discourses already circulating in popular and mainstream culture and arguably intensify these messages and lessons of racial difference through the power and allure of interactive gameplay," thus "produc[ing] some of the most powerful, persistent, and problematic lessons about race in American culture" (142). Once more, *San Andreas* is viewed as not only relating to but taking on a discourse already circulating in the culture, while its nature as a videogame appears to make it particularly effective in conveying these ideas.

Yet not everybody outright condemns *San Andreas*'s racial representations. Several scholars provide more complex interpretations of the videogame's racial politics. Rachael Hutchinson, for example, calls for an understanding of *San Andreas* "[a]s a whole text" instead of analyzing aspects of the title representations of race out of context (164). She concludes that

> *San Andreas* is a rich narrative text that does not offer static representations of black and Latino men in isolation, but explores how these men negotiate racial prejudice and overcome biased attitudes. Player choices about how to play the game, and the development of player-character identification over the course of the narrative, both provide strong evidence that *San Andreas* – contrary to its popular and scholarly reputation – is a text deeply concerned with issues of race, prejudice, and how people see each other in society. (167)

Though opposed to the scholarship cited previously, Hutchinson nonetheless operates on the same shared understanding of the videogame processing the real-world dynamics of race and racism in the United States.

Bogost, in turn, cites *San Andreas* as a prime example for ideological frames implied in mainstream videogames (*Persuasive* 112–120). Already in the first paragraph of his account, he points out that the game "takes on a cultural moment steeped deeply in racial and economic politics" and that "in *San Andreas* open gameplay, expansive virtual spaces, and the inner-city collide to underscore opportunity biases" (113). In both cases, the implication is that *San Andreas* bears some relation to really existing social constellations, especially those based on

race, both historical and contemporary, while the latter specifically asserts that the videogame only highlights conditions that precede it, rather than creating them.

Focusing particularly on the game's dietary mechanic – CJ needs to eat regularly, but the only available options are fast food restaurants – and the interplay of the overarching narrative with the free-form gameplay of the open-world form in relation to the crime theme, Bogost sketches out how *San Andreas* affords diametrically opposed interpretations of the same representations in the game. One the one hand, he explains: "The dietary features of *San Andreas* are rudimentary, but the fact that the player must feed his character to continue playing does draw attention to the limited material conditions the game provides for satisfying that need, subtly exposing the fact that problems of obesity and malnutrition in poor communities can partly be attributed to the relative ease and affordability of fast food" (*Persuasive* 114). Consequently, "*San Andreas*'s enforcement of fast food eating serves to expose the social forces that drive the poor and working-class residents of the inner city to consume fast food habitually" (*Persuasive* 115), an assessment similarly presented by Murray, who writes that "[i]t becomes significant to note that in CJ's neighborhood, like many underserved inner-city areas, the only three restaurants in town offer fast food: burgers, fried-chicken, or pizza" (96). The implication is that the game does not simply invent this kind of situation, but that, regarding this matter, it resembles a known reality of so-called food deserts outside (cf. "Food Deserts"). Here the game takes on the role of a critical intervention in an existing socio-economic problem that harms the most disadvantaged in the American society. Hence Murray's pointed summary of *San Andreas*'s cultural implications: "The game seems equal parts social commentary and logical cultural outcome of combining America's ruthless capitalistic impulse with a valorized national legacy of barbarism and hegemony" (91). Either way, *San Andreas* prompts its commentators to ponder and raise the problem of American food deserts rather than evaluate the functionality of the game mechanic itself.

On the other hand, however, the title also appears to afford the opposite reading. Revealing a conservative logic at work simultaneously in *San Andreas*, Bogost describes that

> the game seems to allow the player to overcome the social conditions of poverty and poor nutrition through hard work – a textbook example of moral strength. No matter what the player eats in the pizza place or the chicken hut, he can always build a ripped chest and six-pack for CJ by working out consistently in the game's gym . . . . Despite its apparent support for nutrition as a condition of social station, *San Andreas* allows the player to overcome that condition through relatively simple, if sometimes tedious, work and exercise. Such rules

> might tilt the game toward a more conservative frame, one in which discipline and hard work can overcome material conditions. (*Persuasive* 116)

In this reading, the videogame now suddenly appears to participate in a discourse that perpetuates the situation represented, as it disregards structural inequalities of opportunity in favor of a neoliberal ideal of self-reliance and an ethic of self-improvement through discipline and hard work.

Bogost identifies similar tensions in the game's depiction of criminality – a narrative alluding to structural problems largely caused by systemic racism collides with a form of gameplay that "implicitly affirms the metaphor of criminal behavior as moral depravity" (*Persuasive* 118) – and ultimately concludes that *San Andreas* cannot be reduced to one particular politics, but that, due to its ambivalent procedural rhetoric, it rather affords two interpretations simultaneously, amounting to two antithetical political positions. His concluding statement cogently captures the political potential present in the videogame according to either reading:

> Whether or not *San Andreas*'s creators intended the game to support or critique contemporary conservative ideological structures in the United States is an open question. But the fact that the game has been so universally reviled, not only by the "values-oriented" conservative right but also by centrists like Senators Hillary Clinton and Joseph Lieberman, suggests that neither side has actually played the game. How surprised the conservatives would be to find that a group of Scottish game developers may have placed tens of millions of copies of conservative political rhetoric in the waiting hands of contemporary American youth, including many inner-city youth who would normally be predisposed to oppose Republicans' pro-business, anti-social program stances. And how surprised the liberals might be to find that they have the perfect object lesson for counteracting conservative frames about poverty, class, race, and crime already installed on the nation's PlayStations. (*Persuasive* 118–119)

Others, like K. Miller in her thought-provoking ethnographic take on *San Andreas*, come to similar conclusions. Miller recounts a number of conflicting interpretations by reviewers and players alike, once more ranging from celebrations of the title's political commentary to condemnations of its representational politics, and ultimately concludes that "[t]here is no way to conclusively vindicate or excoriate the story being told here; rather, its ethical implications rely on its players' performances and their interpretive inclinations" ("Grove" 279). Yet, irrespective of any final verdict on *San Andreas*'s position in this discursive field, what remains a stable point of reference in all of these accounts – or, indeed, what is repeatedly and actively reiterated – is both that particular ideological structures are at work in American society, especially affecting disadvantaged communities of color in the form of structural racism, and that the game is accorded a certain amount of power in influencing this discourse (arguably not very surprising, in Bogost's case, in a book titled *Persuasive Games*).

Not unlike parts of Miller's piece, Ben DeVane's and Kurt Squire's study is principally interested in how players of *San Andreas*, specifically teenagers, actually make sense of the videogame's representations, focusing particularly on race and violence. Concerning the representations of race, the authors report some interesting findings from their observations of and interviews with the players. The white players, for instance, not only immediately identified the stereotypes employed by the videogame *as stereotypes* but also interpreted them as stemming from and working in a larger context of American popular culture:

> [F]ar from exemplifying the uncultured White media consumer who tacitly accepts biased portrayals of minorities, the Gamers actively identified stereotypes with regard to race. Again, a larger conversation about race that is remediated through the mass media provides the discursive lens for the Gamers' discussion, one which here centers on representations and stereotypes." (277)

More remarkably, however, the African American players attributed a certain realism to *San Andreas*: first, because they related the poor urban neighborhood in which the videogame starts to the reality of places like "the south side of Chicago" (277), and second, because the plot presents the in-game police as racist, which these players connected to their own real-life experience (277–278). Yet the same players' assessment of the parts of the videogame where *San Andreas*'s race-related realism falls short is even more noteworthy:

> *Athlete 1:* How you [the main character Carl Johnson] buy a nice house.
>
> *Interviewer:* Why's that unrealistic?
>
> *Athlete 1:* Because it's hard for a Black man to buy a house in America.
>
> *Athlete 3:* Yeah . . .
>
> *Athlete 1:* It's damn hard. (DeVane and Squire 278)

These players, then, are acutely aware of the unattainability of the logic of upward mobility presented in *San Andreas*, which is another side of the conservative ideology identified by Bogost. As DeVane and Squire explain, "the Athletes discussed the meanings of race in the game in terms of their own experience and perceptions of racism, which for them were structural issues in that they had to deal with their perceptions of discriminations by legal institutions and entrenched economic systems" (278). This group evidently assesses the videogame in terms of its social realism (cf. Galloway, *Gaming* 70–84).

Although this account cannot tell us whether *San Andreas* would have triggered the same kinds of conversations for these players in a 'natural' setting outside of DeVane and Squire's study, it does testify to the interpretations the players develop on their own when asked about their experiences with the game. As their voices enter a published academic article, in which their comments are furthermore reiterated by the scholars, they participate in the larger public discourse surrounding *Grand Theft Auto* and particularly *San Andreas*. Ultimately, DeVane and Squire draw a conclusion that, in its nuances, is closer to Bogost and K. Miller than to Barrett and Leonard: "Certainly, the game has many flaws, but the ability of some players to 'read' sophisticated critiques of social, political, and commercial institutions suggests that the game's semiotics and overarching narrative may have more depth than its critics allow" (281–282). As with the other accounts, a certain relationship and exchange between the gameworld and outside reality, specifically concerning social, economic, and political conditions based in systemic racism, takes center stage in this assessment of *San Andreas*.

Though her focus is more generally on the performative and experiential aspects of playing (in the virtual world of) *Grand Theft Auto*, Murray's article on *San Andreas* also constitutes a more nuanced view of the videogame's representational politics, with a keen understanding of its intertextual practices. Her interpretation of what it means to play as CJ is not only one of the more sympathetic readings of *San Andreas*'s politics, but it also marks another instance of *Grand Theft Auto* prompting a scholar to talk about an issue larger than (and certainly preceding) the game:

> To complicate matters, this simulated entity that demands continual attention to his physicality is specifically an underprivileged, inner city, African-American male. With *San Andreas*, Rockstar has taken the poor black male body, which is encoded as a human stain on the fabric of a squeaky-clean American dream of opportunity, and pushed it into the center of our attention. This abject presence constitutes a reminder of a shameful history of genocide and slavery. Ideologically configured as base, grinning, dirty, incarcerated, and exhausted, the black body is the remnant of a national equation; a glitch that cannot be assimilated into the system. But now, that signifier of the black body, that shell upon which so many negative associations has been projected, becomes a mirror for a thorny cluster of societal relations in America.
>
> At the same time, Rockstar reminds us of how fetishized that body actually is – or, more accurately, *will become* – subsequent to the cultural moment of the game. ("High" 96)

The critical point here, from the perspective of this chapter, is not how the videogame actually represents the black body, but that it conjures the cultural history and continuing reality of this body in the discourse it engenders in the first place, that it makes scholars like Murray discuss it.

While the accounts presented in the previous paragraphs are but an exemplary selection, they clearly showcase one of the dominant ways in which *Grand Theft Auto* has been read: as a (series of) text(s) that effectively trades in certain aspects of a social reality outside of the game, in this case racially inflected inequalities of opportunity and a history and continuing presence of systemic racism. Even as – or, perhaps, because – these readings span a sizeable field of opinions and judgments, frequently contradicting each other, they tell a distinct story about one of the agencies of *Grand Theft Auto* in relation to American culture. Despite their disparate arguments and conclusions, the very fact that these accounts constitute a kind of controversy about something indicates that they are, in fact, connected and guided by common assumptions and concerns shared by all of them (cf. Latour 52). While there seems to be no agreement on the politics of *San Andreas*, none of the commentators appear to doubt that "the game is grounded in a very recognizable reality of poverty, corruption, and violent race relations," to quote another one of them (Annandale 95). The game is attributed a relevance to real social problems that remains consistent even as interpretations diverge.

More than that, this phenomenon furthermore takes on an interesting meaning, indeed the crucial one for this chapter, when thought to its logical conclusion: It is because of *Grand Theft Auto* that they all talk about these realities of persisting systemic racism and inequalities of opportunity in the United States in the first place. This is not to say that these scholars would not otherwise be invested in these issues or that they would not speak about them under different circumstances; but it is undeniably *Grand Theft Auto* that makes them produce all of these accounts cited before. These texts, in turn, not only vaguely enter a public conversation, they all talk to each other, too. Some, like Dyer-Witheford's and de Peuter's chapter on *Grand Theft Auto*, even systematically review and group previous readings before weighing in on one side with their own interpretation (166–167), while still operating under the same concerns as all the others. Either way, most of these accounts constantly reference one another, at times challenging and at others confirming different views, amounting to a dynamic discourse rather than mere individual assessments, a network of voices revolving around the same core concern.

Before arriving at a conclusion of what this means for the cultural work of *Grand Theft Auto* in the context of systemic racism in the United States, it is helpful to once more refer to Kelleter and the motivations behind his ANT-inspired approach to the study of popular culture. Explaining his focus on the reception practices surrounding cultural objects in a research project within the field of American studies, he writes:

> It is a fact well known but worth repeating that scholars of contemporary texts are always doing more than simply analyzing those texts, especially when they operate within and on the same environment as their texts – which is the case when American media scholars examine American television or, for that matter, when Americanists from the United States produce knowledge about America. Whatever else their goals and results, these types of study 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. (*Serial* 32)

With regard to the scholarly accounts of *San Andreas* surveyed above, this means that they inevitably also participate in the performance of American culture, and hence in its reproduction, especially in their collaborative insistence on certain matters of concern. The crucial point, then, is not whether any of these authors are correct in their judgments; many of them certainly are, but there is no hope that the matter will be decided once and for all, nor is there any necessity to do so in the first place. Instead, and regardless of such questions, *Grand Theft Auto*'s agency – understood here in Latour's sense of entities that "make others do things" (107) – can be identified as exerting influence on other actors who occupy certain (often public) roles in American culture and who, in doing so, contribute to its continuing existence and its shape. Through textual accounts written by scholars and others, *Grand Theft Auto* thus reproduces and reinvigorates particular narratives and debates about the state of systemic racism in the United States, about the American racial imaginary and the real conditions resulting from it, and about the persistent inequalities of opportunity for the most marginalized in this society. What unites the disparate voices invoked before is a sincere concern about these conditions, the necessity to address them, and the role of entertainment media in their reproduction. One answer to the question of what *Grand Theft Auto* is to American culture, then, must be: a catalyst to ongoing debates about the continuing harm of racist structures and practices in the United States in the twenty-first century.

Any discussion of structural racism in the United States today must also take into consideration the far-reaching effects of the neoliberal policies introduced over the course of the past three and a half decades and the accompanying ascent of neoliberal ideas to become the dominant ordering principle of the world, permeating practically all aspects of life in the twenty-first century. *Grand Theft Auto* is no exception here, so it does not come as a surprise that the second major exchange between the games and American reality outside invoked by many commentators regards what is perceived as the series' reproduction, or even embracing, of neoliberal logics – at times related to the question of racial representation (and discrimination) and at times considered on its own. Although most texts that employ this line of argument focus on a single *Grand Theft Auto* title – the most notable excep-

tion is Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's chapter, which runs the gamut from *Vice City* to *GTA IV* – this kind of reading has been applied across all installments since *Vice City* and thus appears to concern the series at large.

A common variety of this argumentation concerns the world projected by *Grand Theft Auto* and how it mirrors the real-world locales of neoliberal capitalism. The prime example of this is Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's work, which examines videogames through the lens of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of Empire. This concept refers to "a new planetary regime in which economic, administrative, military, and communicative components combine to create a system of power 'with no outside'" (xix). In Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's view, *Grand Theft Auto*'s "more important contribution is . . . not as a 'murder simulator' but as an 'urban simulator' – virtually re-creating the great metropolitan centers that are key sites of Empire" (xxxii). They write that "*GTA* constitutes the politics of city space in ways that are not just generically urban but characteristically imperial. Its digital sandbox arises . . . from a specific moment in global capital's creation of world cities and, in turn, reproduces imperial territorializations of class and race" (xxxii). Since, for the authors, *Grand Theft Auto* constitutes an urban simulator, the implication is that it virtually replicates, in a simplified form, something that exists outside of the game: the city as the linchpin of the hegemonic regime described by Hardt and Negri. As with the topic of racism discussed previously, the matter of concern here is not so much what the videogames create *ex nihilo*, but what they do in relation to the outside in question, in this case neoliberalism (which can be considered an ideological foundation or underlying organizational structure for Hardt and Negri's Empire).

While Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter focus on a different aspect of this for each of the titles they analyze, their take on *Vice City* epitomizes the tenor of the accounts that consider *Grand Theft Auto* at large in the light of neoliberal capitalism. The game's eponymous city, they write, "is constructed as a virtual space exemplary of neoliberal urbanism, where market imperatives are literally the rules of the game" (157). And further: "Accumulate enough money, arms, and associates, and you will have a shot at territorial control over the criminal economy of Vice City, a virtual version of Miami during Ronald Reagan's presidency – a prime space and time of 'neoliberal urbanism'" (159). One has to differentiate here that territorial control in the narrow sense, while certainly applying to some extent to all *Grand Theft Auto* games on a narrative level, is an issue mainly for *Vice City*, *San Andreas*, and *GTA V*, which all feature the accumulation of property or even the domination over whole neighborhoods in their game mechanics. The domination of urban territory, however, is only one figuration of *Grand Theft Auto*'s representation of the neoliberal order according to its critics; the more

substantial entanglement runs deeper in the series' DNA and can be found everywhere in its structure.

According to many critics, the very logic of *Grand Theft Auto* is shot through with neoliberal logics. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, for example, point out that by "[p]resenting players with missions carrying injunctions like 'Kill the competition,' and orbiting around 'unlocking' accumulation opportunities, *Vice City* puts market imperatives and their rewards into playable form" (162). Barrett, who connects questions of racism and capitalism in his account of *San Andreas*, identifies a similar logic at work:

> Not only does the player earn money for completing tasks, but there are a wide range of shops and malls in which the player can spend that money. *San Andreas* represents a sort of pure capitalism, or a realization of the neoliberal dream in which the market becomes the apparatus around which all institutions are organized. The ability of a player to take the car, money or gun of another character, by any means possible, is justification enough to do it. There is no social presence that mediates transactions, but instead profit is the overriding imperative for all acts. (105)

In fact, he argues, "[i]f liberalism is based on the idea of the social contract, and neoliberalism on the stripping away of the social, leaving nothing but the contract, then *San Andreas* does an excellent job of representing a 'pure' neoliberal order, as any form of collective social responsibility is subordinate to the profit motivation and market law" (105). In this view, the market appears to be the main organizing principle of both narrative and gameplay in *Grand Theft Auto*. Consequently, such accounts draw attention to the ways in which a real-world development – the rise of neoliberal ideas and practices – seep into the popular form of the videogame, as it "puts market imperatives and their rewards into playable form" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 162). From this perspective, *Grand Theft Auto* seems like a perfect example of what Mark Fisher has called "capitalist realism," by which he refers to "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (2). Compare this to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's assessment of *Vice City*:

> *Vice City* constructs a virtual town in which urban space is defined first and foremost as a venue of profit extraction, networking is the path to commercial success, and consumption is the dominant reward system. There is, simply, no countervailing logic . . . . So, paradoxically, *Vice City* may depict a deviant criminal subculture, but the game *works* through the habitual logic of the dominant order." (164)

What connects these statements is the common agreement that there is a prevailing system – the neoliberal one – in the United States which suffuses practically every aspect of life, and that this system is perfectly represented by *Grand Theft*

*Auto*. One can arguably also turn this assessment around and argue that it is precisely because of aesthetic objects like *Grand Theft Auto*, which employ a neoliberal logic, that this order is capable of permeating (particularly American) life in the twenty-first century so comprehensively. The cultural products we consume play an important role in defining our imaginary of what is possible, so something like *Grand Theft Auto* clearly contributes to a world in which it becomes increasingly harder to imagine a different order. Fisher writes that "[c]apitalist realism is . . . not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself" (4). In a way, one could say that "[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (Fisher 8) precisely because it both heavily informs *Grand Theft Auto* and constitutes a dominant lens to understanding it.

While not explicitly mentioning neoliberalism, McKenzie Wark, in her thought-provoking treatise on *Gamer Theory*, understands *Vice City* as an "atopia" that embodies a perfect realization of a world in sync with neoliberal ideas:

> All that matters is the quantitative relations. By excluding relations, utopia excludes violence; by privileging relations, atopia appears as nothing but violence, but only because it excludes instead any commitment to stable description. Anything that matters can be transformed in precise and repeatable ways into something else. The relentless working out of the algorithm leaves behind a carnage of signs, immolated in the transformation of one value into another. (119)

What Wark describes here is how videogames like *Vice City* realize the ideal of a world where each and every entity is assigned a value and which is governed entirely by a logic of "quantitative relations" between objects. When everything has been assigned a value, everything becomes exchangeable on the basis of its values – a pure and untainted market becomes the organizing principle. In fact, similar to Barrett's previously cited assessment, Wark identifies how the world of *Vice City* achieves what neoliberalism in the real world – which is called "gamespace" throughout Wark's book – never could: a system that functions according to defined rules, which are the same for everyone and which guarantee that individual effort in accordance with these rules in fact allows for anyone to succeed. Wark explains:

> The rules of *Vice City* call for a vast accumulation of cash, cars, and cronies, of weapons and real estate. Most of these activities are outside the law, but law is just part of a larger algorithm. In any case, the story and the art are arbitrary, mere decoration. If in utopia everything is subordinated to a rigorous description, a marking of space with signs, in atopia nothing matters but the transitive relations between variables. The artful surfaces of the game are just a way for the gamer to intuit their way through the steps of the algorithm. Hence the paradox of *Vice City*. Its criminal world is meant to be shocking to the literary or cinematic imagination, where there is still a dividing line between right and wrong and where description is meant to actually describe something. But to a gamer, it's just a means

> to discover an algorithm. *Vice City*'s post-film noir world implies not that one can step back from it into the light but that while driving around and around in it one can discover the algorithm to which gamespace merely aspires and by which it is to be judged in its entirety. (120)

The implication here is that unlike the real world under neoliberalism, the videogame not only works according to predefined rules that never change (the algorithm), it is also possible for anybody to discover these rules and, thus, to figure out how the system works. Yes, "you chance your arm in an agon of all against all" (Wark 117), but contrary to the world created by neoliberalism, the rules are indeed intelligible to the player, and success or failure consequently do depend on their performance only. This credo of self-reliance is one of the tenets of neoliberal ideology. In summary, Wark, despite her drawing on similar conceptualizations, can be read as making a different point about *Grand Theft Auto* and neoliberalism than her peers. She too underscores capitalist drive and market imperative, but she does so less to imply that these videogames become somehow complicit and rather to demonstrate how, by being so much closer to the ideological promises of neoliberalism than reality, *Vice City* actually exposes the failures of the dominant order. Nonetheless, Wark's take on the videogame remains one that speaks to the question of neoliberalism without resorting to making explicit statements about neoliberalism.

In this context, another common matter of concern that frequently recurs across accounts of practically every release of the series since *GTA III* clusters around the videogames' core narrative principle: the American Dream. While I cannot discuss this aspect at length here, the general dynamic goes as follows. *Grand Theft Auto* tells stories of (an inversion of) the American Dream, which is tirelessly reiterated by commentators, particularly those outside the United States. Even though the videogames appear to challenge the feasibility of the Dream, the endless repetitions and invocations perpetuate its existence; as long as people keep talking about it, it persists. Yet a certain (upward) class mobility is implied in both *Grand Theft Auto* and accounts of the videogames. Few commentators, however, address the central importance of class as class in this context (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter are one notable exception). In the end, Wills concludes,

> [g]amic goals clash with satirical play; instant rewards and gratifications undercut any greater narrative of disillusionment; and the freedom and opportunism of the game world belies the reality of an American Dream out of reach for many. In these ways, Rockstar's critique of American life lacks well-programmed cohesion. Crucially, the flow of the game for most players is more cars, more money, and more trophy achievements, a digital realm where, in spite of the satire, the American Dream seems very much alive and kicking. ("Ain't" 13)

One major aspect of the entire *Grand Theft Auto* series that its commentators link to neoliberalism is the games' depiction of the state and the public, especially in the game mechanics. In these readings, *Grand Theft Auto*'s market imperative is seen as complemented by a public sphere that negates any redemptive potential. The prime representative of this kind of reading is Barrett, whose interpretation is frequently and concurringly referenced in other texts, including Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's widely cited study. Barrett asserts: "When the public is represented in *San Andreas*, it is configured as a site of terror, insecurity, and uncertainty. The public arena is marked as a site where violence is not only probable, but imminent" (101). And further: "Within the game, the state has absolutely no presence aside from that of a carceral role . . . . This shifting of the state from a public, representative institution to a strictly carceral body of management is directly in line with the neoliberal imagining of the state" (104–105). These statements betray two decisive things.

First, a keen observation of the ways in which the public and the state factor in *Grand Theft Auto*'s gameplay. The public – that is, anywhere outside the protagonist's home and commercial property – is a space that offers no protection for anyone, including the protagonist; the violence that made *Grand Theft Auto* notorious happens here. The figurations of the state – local and federal law enforcement and the military – almost exclusively act as disciplinary forces punishing the protagonist (and thus the player) for his actions. Discussing *GTA IV*, Alberto Vanolo explains: "Consider the use and representation of public space: in the game, it is simply dangerous. The character can be robbed, beaten, hit by a car and eventually killed, all of which are serious possibilities. On the contrary, private space is safe: you can sleep, watch television, relax, accumulate things in your house. The attributes of these spaces produce a strong dichotomy" (293).

Second, accounts like Barrett's show certain assumptions about views of the state in the neoliberal mindset. Here the state – or, rather, the presumed neoliberal view of the state – is described as carceral, which is tantamount to inhibiting personal and commercial freedom. Barrett's strong wording heavily tilts toward a rigorous anti-state stance, but his evocation of a "body of management" implies an understanding that views the state not solely as an inhibiting but rather as an ordering force. Here *Grand Theft Auto*, and the communications it engenders, touch upon an issue that is often somewhat misrepresented in the popular discourse about neoliberalism. Commentators frequently describe the state and the proponents of neoliberalism simply as opposing actors, with the latter despising all forms of state intervention. Such a view, however, distorts the reality that states are deeply involved in the neoliberal project as they facilitate and maintain the free market neoliberal capitalism thrives on. The state, in this sense, is in fact indispensable to neoliberalism, as Harvey explains:

> According to theory, the neoliberal state should favour strong individual property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade. These are the institutional arrangements considered essential to guarantee individual freedoms. The legal framework is that of freely negotiated contractual obligations between juridical individuals in the marketplace. The sanctity of contracts and the individual right to freedom of action, expression, and choice must be protected. The state must therefore use its monopoly of the means of violence to preserve these freedoms at all costs. By extension, the freedom of businesses and corporations (legally regarded as individuals) to operate within this institutional framework of free markets and free trade is regarded as a fundamental good. (64)

The state indeed becomes a tool of business interests under the reality of neoliberalism:

> The coercive arm of the state is augmented to protect corporate interests and, if necessary, to repress dissent. None of this seems consistent with neoliberal theory. The neoliberal fear that special-interest groups would pervert and subvert the state is nowhere better realized than in Washington, where armies of corporate lobbyists (many of whom have taken advantage of the 'revolving door' between state employment and far more lucrative employment by the corporations) effectively dictate legislation to match their special interests. (Harvey 77)

Concerning *Grand Theft Auto*, the coercive arm of the state is most relevant here. When the player is apprehended by police in the game, this is absolutely in line with neoliberal theory. It is only from the point of view of the player and the protagonist that freedom would be limited by the state here, not when taking the perspective of all the other characters in the gameworld. Hence, Barrett's assessment that *San Andreas* represents the neoliberal order is correct, by and large; his elaborations on the dichotomy between state and market, however, veer closer to popular misrepresentations of neoliberalism than to its actual functioning.

What does all of this mean with regard to *Grand Theft Auto*? Or, to turn the question around again, what does *Grand Theft Auto* mean to the United States under neoliberal capitalism, then? Judging by the accounts of the videogames in the context of neoliberalism, the series continues to prompt people to critically discuss the symptoms of over three decades of neoliberal policies. While most of these accounts are critiques of *Grand Theft Auto* and its apparent replication of neoliberal ideas and practices – Wark is a notable exception – their real target is the multifaceted phenomenon that is generally, and often too simplistically, referred to as neoliberalism itself. Too simplistically because neoliberalism as an economic theory, neoliberalism as a practice, neoliberalism as a mindset, and the distinct effects of particular policies are often conflated in ways that do not do justice to the complexities and sometimes irreconcilability of the matters at stake here. Nonetheless, by activating various actors to talk about these issues, *Grand Theft Auto* continues the proliferation of a discourse concerned with the societal effects of the neoliberal policies implemented over the past few decades and a

perceived neoliberal mindset that has emerged from the advance of neoliberalism around the globe. This includes a slightly distorting effect when the relation between state and market in neoliberal practice is misrepresented. It is, furthermore, intimately tied to discussions of a longstanding tradition of racist policies and practices whose racist impetus is frequently denied and whose reality is often instead justified by resorting to neoliberal idea(l)s like individual responsibility and the myth of meritocracy, which Barrett summarizes as such: "Taken together, these undercurrents in the game's environment and narrative serve to naturalize and reinforce (as well as justify) neoliberal policies that divest power from politics and collapse public concerns into private worries" (95). Contemporary racism and neoliberal capitalism have to be thought together, and several of *Grand Theft Auto*'s commentators do exactly that.

To conclude this part, it is noteworthy how the change of perspective that the method employed in this chapter entails now leads to an assessment of *Grand Theft Auto* fundamentally different from that found in most existing accounts of the series. The question of whether a particular aspect of one or several of the videogames is racist, supportive of neoliberal capitalism, or otherwise problematic, recedes into the background. They may well be all of the above – there are plenty of arguments to be made vis-à-vis some of the series' politics – but this does not tell us anything substantial about what *Grand Theft Auto* really *does*, how it *acts* in the world. From the view of this chapter, *Grand Theft Auto* seems to not necessarily work in line with its apparent politics. In terms of its functioning within the system of American culture, rather than reproducing racism and neoliberal ideas in the world, we can see how the series – in part, perhaps, because of its politics – actually produces critical conversations directed at precisely the phenomena it seems to be implicated in on a representational level. Granted, *Grand Theft Auto* probably reinforces particular stereotypes and logics in those who already hold them, though it is, of course, extremely difficult methodologically to establish generalizable evidence for this. But the series' more significant contribution in this respect is how, by activating actors like the ones referenced above, by making them communicate in particular ways, it traceably engages in the reproduction of certain narratives – in this case of the role of neoliberalism in the United States – central to American culture in the twenty-first century. In this sense, *Grand Theft Auto* can be both racist, sexist, neoliberal, etc., and an agent that facilitates critical discourse on these issues as it allows players to play with and assess from a certain distance several systems in which they are otherwise immersed in the real world. "We can pick the game, but we cannot change the rules," as *GTA IV*'s Dimitri Rascalov aptly summarizes.

Finally, I would like to end this section with some remarks on the larger implications of the set of associations described above. This chapter began with a

little musing about the Great American Novel and whether it is possible that it is created by a non-American author and that it is a series of videogames. Central to the idea of the Great American Novel is that such a work would capture something essential about America – not necessarily understood as the nation state of the United States but as an imaginary, rather mythical entity connected to the former – at the period in history the work is published in. While the proposal of *Grand Theft Auto* as a Great American Novel is, of course, not meant entirely seriously, this subchapter does prompt a few thoughts that prohibit one from dismissing the idea altogether. As shown above, the two major issues the videogames seem to work with and cause others to talk about are racism and neoliberal capitalism. If one had to define the world of *Grand Theft Auto*, these two would have to take central roles; they are part of its DNA, as it were. Arguably, the same holds true for the United States: from settler colonialism to slavery and into the neoliberal era, the coupling of racist and capitalist ideas and endeavors has been a defining trait of American society and culture. Racism and capitalism have, of course, always come hand in hand, yet it is hard to imagine a more extraordinary example of how a nation and its culture emerge from this double impetus to rise to global dominance than the United States. The interlacing dynamics of racism and capitalism define America as much as they define *Grand Theft Auto*. Hence the significance of the series' cultural work lies perhaps less in the parodic portraits it paints of American society and rather in the way it causes a considerable number of actors to discuss precisely the two dynamics that best characterize America – and to not simply discuss them on their own terms or in any kind of isolation, but always decidedly in relation to America. This is how *Grand Theft Auto*'s representational politics work in and on American culture, regardless of the franchise's origin, and because of this the franchise appears to approximate a videogame version of the Great American Novel.

### 2.2.3 Sensing Place: Myth, Mediation, and the American City

Perhaps the most consistently invoked narrative of *Grand Theft Auto* throughout all installments of the series is that the videogames create a convincing sense of place, specifically in relation to real American locales. With the exception of the mission pack *London 1969* (released in 1999 for *GTA*), all *Grand Theft Auto* titles are set in American cities, all of which are fictional but modeled after existing real places. Their gameworlds seem to possess a certain affective quality that creates genuinely urban experiences, which furthermore elicit strong sensorial associations with their real-world models despite being entirely simulational. "There is a general agreement," Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter summarize, "that the

great design achievement of the *GTA* franchise is its re-creation of major American metropolitan environments" (156; cf. K. Miller, "Jacking" 409–410). Since the cities *Grand Theft Auto* emulates – New York City, Miami, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Las Vegas – are among the most mythical, because endlessly remediated, places in the world, the games' (inter)textual practices are deeply entangled in the long histories of representations of these cities in popular culture, and so is their reception. Los Angeles, for instance, as Mike Davis argues, is decisively informed by its "city myth, which enters the material landscape as a design for speculation and domination (as Allan Seager suggests, 'not [as] fantasy imagined but [as] fantasy seen')" (23). Davis asserts that "celluloid or the electronic screen have remained the dominant media of the region's self-expression. Compared to other great cities, Los Angeles may be *planned* or *designed* in a very fragmentary sense (primarily at the level of its infrastructure) but it is infinitely *envisioned*" (23). In this way, Los Angeles has long been "everywhere" (12), as people throughout the country and, indeed, around the entire globe have, again and again, consumed an image that came to stand in for the actual city, a city that has always already been "a commodity," as Morrow Mayo put it in 1933 (qtd. in Davis 17). In Jean Baudrillard's words, Los Angeles is itself "hyperreal in its vitality, it has all the energy of the simulacrum" (*America* 104). It is in this tradition that *Grand Theft Auto* and its commentators alike engage in the continuing mediation, indeed simulation, of American metropoles – especially New York City and Los Angeles – and thus contribute to their simulacral state, while at the same appearing to insist on some fundamental essence inherent in the real places.

In order to understand *Grand Theft Auto*'s implication in an ongoing practice of relating to urban American locales via highly stylized and symbol-laden visual media representations, a brief return to the series' origin and history of production is necessary. As described earlier in this chapter, during the production of *GTA*, its inventor David Jones decided that the game's three playable cities would represent New York City, Miami, and San Francisco, apparently for marketing reasons (Kushner 32). The market logic Kushner ascribes to Jones's creative decision arguably presupposes that American cities sell because they do indeed work for the target audience, which implies that players are not only familiar with these places (because of their recurring exposure to previous representations) but also desire them; in other words, a market-based design decision here depends on assumptions of both recognizability and demand. While *GTA*'s renderings of these simulated American cities themselves are still a long way from being capable to produce effective (that is, affective) experiences of the urban areas referenced in the videogame, they are nonetheless already informed by and, therefore, connected to a discourse of American metropoles in which media representations have largely supplanted the real thing. Add to this Sam Houser's long-standing romance with

American popular culture and especially New York City (Kushner 9–10), and you get a brand obsessed with the ever-more sophisticated simulation of American cities, but a simulation that refers mainly to other, previous representations or even simulations – a series of simulacra (cf. Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6).

Yet there is a second, countervailing aspect to this dynamic: beginning with *GTA III*, which marks *Grand Theft Auto*'s coming-of-age not only as a videogame but as an "urban simulator" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter xxxii), an insistence on realism was established in the series' development. According to Kushner, the Housers' "mantra for *GTA III*" during the development process was "real, real, real" (82). This was also the time when on-site cultural research became a central aspect of developing *Grand Theft Auto* videogames: members of the team would go out to the locations that were supposed to be simulated and record sounds and visuals. For *GTA III*, for example, "[Marc] Fernandez became the self-described 'details guy,' in charge of cultural research. This meant everything from making sure that car doors swung open the right way to roaming the streets of Chinatown, taking shots of storefronts for inspiration in the game" (Kushner 79). This is particularly interesting because, according to Dan Houser, *GTA III* was originally not intended to refer to any specific real-world city: "With GTA III we did a hybrid city that was an empty city but it wasn't meant to be New York. It was a post industrial Midwest slash east coast generic, a deliberately generic feeling, American city. But making that we realized, actually, if you base this more on a real place you have a lot of things you can say about it" (G. Miller). Interestingly, this contradicts an earlier interview in which Dan Houser denied that *GTA III* featured a version of New York City: "In the old games [Liberty City] was just vaguely East Coast-ish. It wasn't New York and it wasn't trying to be" (Morris). Nevertheless, the quest for realism – or, more precisely, "realisticness" (Galloway, *Gaming* 73) – stems from the desire to tell stories about something that is recognizable because already known, which presupposes a hypermediated place on the order of New York City or Los Angeles. As Kushner describes it regarding the development of *GTA III*, "[t]hey would simulate New York City – not the actual one outside their door, but the larger-than-life fantasy that, in some ways, was more real" (83), a notion I revisit shortly. In the following years of the series, fidelity to the referents would remain central. Research for *San Andreas* included driving around Los Angeles' inner-city neighborhoods with a local and recording passersby, as well as recording players at gambling tables in Las Vegas and capturing the city's streets and night clubs with cameras and audio recorders (Kushner 134–135, 138, 159). When the next generation of gaming consoles, the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, enabled a new level of detail in these gameworlds, the ambition to recreate the vibes of these cities took on yet another dimension with *GTA IV*, in which Rockstar wanted "to capture the Big Apple in all of its madness" (Kushner 261). This meant that, in New York City,

> the coders and the artists from Rockstar North arrived with cameras and notebooks in hand. It remained one of *GTA*'s great and largely unappreciated ironies – that a bunch of Scots were creating the most influential simulation of America ever made. More than fifty of them scoured the neighborhoods, taking thousands of photos of the people and the places to get the right feel. (Kushner 261; cf. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 170–171)

Rockstar Games' ambitions to achieve a particular realism – described by Dan Houser as "not trying to be 100% accurate, but . . . trying to capture the essence of the place" (Morris) – indicate two interesting things. First, the real-world cities feature as direct referents, in addition to their media representations. It is not enough for Rockstar Games to create playable versions of already circulating media images; rather, the goal is to establish recognizable relations to the actual cities. As Dan Houser explains: "We were consciously trying to go, well, if videogames are going to develop into the next stage, then the thing isn't to try and do a loving tribute or reference other stuff. It's to reference the actual place itself" (Morris). Second, the research endeavors carried out in pursuit of this goal, like Houser's statements, appear to be based on the assumption that there are some essential qualities to these places to begin with, whether they are visual, auditory, or something else; if only one can identify, capture, and reproduce these in the gameworld, the experience will feel real(istic). In the words of Dan Houser: "Everything comes from the place. I think place is something games do very well" (G. Miller).

Hence, two parallel yet at the same time seemingly 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. Both of these forces are effects of playing American, here manifesting itself in the simulation of American places, both real and mediated. These effects have strongly informed the reception of *Grand Theft Auto* since *GTA III*, to the extent that, more often than not, commentators would recognize and highlight the lineage of media representations present in one of the videogames and simultaneously affirm how close they are, or at least *feel*, to the real city.

One of the earliest academic discussions dedicated specifically to the issue of place in *Grand Theft Auto* is Bogost and Dan Klainbaum's essay "Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice City." Examining both *Vice City* and *San Andreas*, the authors identify and underscore how the two forces sketched out above work together in the games:

> By focusing on popular culture's mediation of contemporary American cities instead of directly mapping physical terrain, the GTA series embodies a highly playable (though geographically incorrect) translation of real places. In this context, *translation* refers not only

> to the physical treatment of each city's local architecture and atmosphere, but also to a rendition of the spirit of these cities as they exist in popular culture. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (GTA:VC)* is more representative of the 1980s television cop drama Miami Vice than of the city of Miami, and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (GTA:SA)* is more representative of the 1990s film *Boyz in the Hood* than of the city of Los Angeles. By leveraging these popular notions with existing spatial conventions, Rockstar creates an amalgam of real and mediated places resulting in hybrid virtual cities whose cultural rules prove more salient than their physical geography. (162)

What is interesting here is that, while explicitly differentiating between media representations and reality, Bogost and Klainbaum seem to affirm that the videogames' primary reference are the real cities, which are translated into the gameworlds by way of cultural signifiers. This notion returns throughout their text, for example, when they refer to *Grand Theft Auto*'s "ability to create compelling fictional places based on real American cities" (164). At the same time, however, *Grand Theft Auto* appears to capture both something that exists in reality and something that only exists in representational form across a cluster of media objects. Even as the authors then tilt their interpretation of *Vice City* and *Los Santos* toward the cultural representational level, the core assumption remains that there is a certain character to each of these places, which in the videogames is merged with an atmosphere already circulating in popular culture (cf. Böhme 21–48). In this way, *Grand Theft Auto*'s work regarding the popular imaginary of the American city continues in a scholarly account that aims to deconstruct it. Others go even further in simply taking for granted that the games reference a real place: in their chapter "Imperial City: *Grand Theft Auto*," for example, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter treat and discuss Vice City, Los Santos, and Liberty City as if they actually were Miami, Los Angeles, and New York City (153–182).

Yet Bogost and Klainbaum do offer a convincing analysis of the way in which *Grand Theft Auto*'s compelling urban experiences depend on "symbolic representation," and they point out that "San Andreas and Vice City are built on the symbolic perceptions of Los Angeles and Miami respectively" (165). Here the formerly apparent schism between the real and the mediated disappears as the experience of the real place is presented as tied to such symbolic perceptions. By comparing *San Andreas* with another videogame that recreates Los Angeles, also taking into account how both hold up to Bogost's own experiences as a former resident of the city, the authors elucidate why *San Andreas* succeeds where *True Crime: Streets of LA* (the other videogame) fails in creating a convincing sense of the City of Angels. Although the latter aspires to "cartographic verisimilitude" by recreating the actual geography of parts of Los Angeles in great detail (167), it does not seem to achieve the 'feeling' of being in Los Angeles. *True Crime*'s city, as it were, has no soul, or, as the authors put it, "the game's focus on the cartographic over

the symbolic makes the city feel technical, designed rather than alive" (169). This is a good occasion to note that this chapter itself – the entire book, really – despite its meta-perspective, is not exempt from participating in and continuing the very cultural work it describes by how it describes it (cf. Latour 124–128).

Bogost and Klainbaum's sentiment is echoed in Dan Houser's assessment of "[h]aving seen other games do that, they get so bogged down in fidelity they actually don't end up with the spirit of place" (Morris). *San Andreas*, on the other hand, appears to achieve the opposite sensation with an opposite strategy – that is, by relying on symbolic representations of architecture, relational geographies, and evocative names – so that

> Los Santos serves as a surprisingly convincing simulation of Los Angeles. With the many inconsistencies of cartographic realism averted, Los Santos invites players to fill in the details of its symbolic abstractions with their own experiences. Importantly, these experiences can be real and personal – like Bogost's and other Angeleno's intimate, daily experiences with the city – or they can be fictional and received – like viewers' experience of *Boyz in the Hood*, *LA Story*, *Heat*, or other filmic and televisual representations of Los Angeles. (Bogost and Klainbaum 170)

The title's effectiveness in evoking prior experiences of the player arguably depends on implementing the right perceptual markers and evocative triggers to begin with, predominately in the form of ambient operations as outlined in chapter 1. An element in the gameworld that is true to its real-life counterpart but that does not work to link the gameworld's repertoire (cf. Iser 114–120) to that of the player will not achieve a sense of place. This logic, however, still relies on the assumption that there are some essential aspects to begin with and that these are the ones that need to be identified during research, which is another way of saying that each city has a particular character, a notion I return to shortly. This assumption serves as a fundamental cornerstone of the entire discourse around conceptions of place in *Grand Theft Auto*. What Bogost's and Klainbaum's assessment implies, in any case, is that the feeling of place in *Grand Theft Auto*'s virtual (and fictional) cities relies on the ways in which their symbolic representations connect mostly successfully to a preexisting knowledge of their real-life counterparts – that is, how they effectively align with certain presumptions about these places, regardless of what these presumptions are based on. By extension, and through this particular connection, *Grand Theft Auto* thus continues the work of the cultural imaginary that has formed around iconic American cities. As the final section of this chapter shows, the ambioperative quality of the gameworld is a decisive factor in this.

The way players experience the virtual places of *Grand Theft Auto* can be related to a variation of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "the principle of minimal departure" (51), which refers to the ways in which audiences make sense of and fill

the gaps in fictional worlds by relating them to what is closest to them in the real world, whether this is a real place or a mediated representation. This principle arguably also overrides aspects of the videogames' "inter-ludic seriality" (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 11) – that is, the recurring use of the same fictional cities (particularly Liberty City and Los Santos) – in the player's experiencing of the game-worlds. Take one of those countlessly mediated places represented in several *Grand Theft Auto* titles as an example: Central Park in New York City. Players encounter it in every incarnation of Liberty City from *GTA* through *GTA III* to *GTA IV*. While veteran players might halt for a moment and ask themselves why "Park" is now called "Belleville Park" and later "Middle Park" as they play one game after the other, the more substantial connotation each time is that this is, indeed, Central Park, or rather, *Grand Theft Auto*'s rendition of it. Hence, it seems to be irrelevant whether Brooklyn is called Brocklyn, Trenton, or Broker, what matters is that players perceive it as a representation of Brooklyn each time around. Likewise, when players return to Los Santos in *GTA V*, a decade after *San Andreas*, it does not matter much that the city looks extremely different from its first incarnation – which is no wonder given the technological advances in gaming technologies during this time span. For example, although Grove Street, home to protagonists of both games, is no longer in the fictional district of Ganton but in a neighborhood called Davis, this is not important, even as some players wonder why the developers might have renamed it. What is important is that players are still in *Grand Theft Auto*'s version of Compton, and while the names have changed, the atmosphere of the neighborhood, created largely through ambient operations, has not, and neither have its connotations.

Returning to the parallel work of the real and the mediated in the reception of *Grand Theft Auto*'s virtual cities, both forces are present – often unresolved – in most accounts that engage the question of place in one way or another. Murray's article on *San Andreas*, for example, which appears to be the first to explicitly speak of "an expansive sense of 'place'" in *Grand Theft Auto* ("High" 91–92), is no exception. As she elucidates the multifarious components that work together to create *San Andreas*'s gameplay experience in general and its sense of place in particular, she rightly points out the relevant reference points that anchor the game in distinct histories of representation in popular culture:

> With *San Andreas*, developers emulated 1990s genre 'hood films like *Colors* (1988), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993). In fact, one of the co-writers of San Andreas is DJ Pooh, screenwriter for the independent ghetto comedy film *Friday* (1995). This shift from a *Scarface*-inflected *Vice City* into *San Andreas*'s original gangsta theme is completely organic, since the hip-hop community heavily appropriated the narrative of Scarface. The film's protagonist, a Cuban immigrant named Tony Montana, fought his way to monetary success through the narcotics trade. Elevated to cult figure status in hip-hop culture, Tony

> Montana embodies the hustler mentality proper to his aggressive capitalistic impulse. Placed in a similar narrative, *Vice City*'s Tommy Vercetti conflates this narrative of economic uplift by any means necessary, with the Italian mob genre. This hybrid figure ultimately isn't as effective. But in the underdog, Carl Johnson, Rockstar achieves the copacetic melding of all these tropes. By tapping into recognizable cultural signifiers such as film, fashion, music, and slang, the designers of *GTA* are able to establish a virtual sense of 'place' that enriches one's overall experience, creating a more seamless environment in which to enact the role of CJ. ("High" 92)

Here Murray draws attention to both the concrete models for Los Santos (early 1990s hood films) and *San Andreas*'s general employment of cultural signifiers for certain effects, thus highlighting the game's deep entanglement in American popular culture. Yet when she goes on to discuss the individual localities of the gameworld, a subtle but interesting shift in how she describes Los Santos becomes noticeable:

> San Andreas presents a vast geography containing eight separate districts and counties. Each district within the state of *San Andreas* has its own distinct feel and vitality. Los Santos feels very much like Los Angeles with its dingy paradise skies, palm trees, and power lines, its grime and glitter all jumbled together. Flint County, Whetstone, and Red County are decidedly rural, crosscut with dusty roads and rundown towns that provide sites for dirty dealings best kept beyond the city limits. San Fierro, reminiscent of San Francisco, is configured as the most eclectic area with an artsy feel and a colorful assortment of alternative citizens. (93)

Note how, in this passage, San Fierro is "reminiscent of San Francisco" and the counties mentioned are "decidedly rural" (that is, generically so), but "Los Santos *feels very much like* Los Angeles" (emphasis added). Here Los Santos appears to closely approximate, on an affective level, its real-world counterpart in a way the other locations do not. 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, including the texts Murray mentions herself. This, however, does not really seem to matter at all precisely because there is no other place, except maybe New York City, where media representation – or simulation, if you will – and the real-world location have become so indistinguishable. When *Grand Theft Auto* plays American in recreating 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 the American city (cf. Davis 23).

Murray provides another account of Los Santos (or dare one say Los Angeles?), this time concerning its rendition in *GTA V*. She writes that

> by far the most interesting character in GTA V is the city of Los Santos. As an Angelino, I found the sense of place to be so sprawling and impressive, endlessly worthy of exploration,

> so full of palpable texture, so unlike LA and uncannily accurate at the same time, as to stir a sense of wonder. This treads into the territory of the sublime. How is that even possible in this jaded day and age? This has been the true strength of the last few versions of the game: sheer scale, detail, and spontaneous responsiveness. It has grown larger than our minds can calculate.
>
> But that feeling which comes along with, for example, staring into the abyss of the Grand Canyon, is not without its sublime terror as well. Los Santos isn't like being in the lived Los Angeles; rather it is more like being in an LA film. Michael Mann's movies, particularly *Heat* (1995) and *Collateral* (2004) come to mind, with their aestheticized noire machismo and peril. ("*Grand*")

Here something interesting comes into play, something already seen (albeit in a different form) in Bogost's and Klainbaum's text: Murray is from Los Angeles and draws on her real-life experience of the city in making sense of Los Santos. As in Bogost's case, this is already interesting because there is, of course, no real Los Santos to draw on. In other words: it is immediately accepted that Los Santos is some kind of simulation of Los Angeles – which it never explicitly claims – simply because the gameworld succeeds in evoking its feel. Hence Bogost can compare his experience of Los Angeles to *San Andreas* in the same way he compares it to *Streets of LA*, which explicitly refers to and aspires to recreate the actual city. To return to Murray's account, she reports how Los Santos is "so unlike LA and uncannily accurate at the same time, as to stir a sense of wonder," a statement imbued with the perceived authority of a native "Angelino," a fact established immediately before. Even as Los Santos is clearly not Los Angeles, it feels just like it, and it feels just like it because it facilitates connections to popular cultural representations of the city, some of which Murray mentions, even as her real-life experience of the city – which is likely informed by media representations itself – sends her contrary signals. Murray, evidently, is keenly aware of the workings of *GTA V*'s remediations of popular tropes and icons, yet she cannot help but to directly relate a sense of place in Los Santos to her own experience of living in Los Angeles, which indicates that, despite the overwhelming weight of mediation, a certain feeling of the real thing lingers in *GTA V*.

The way Murray depicts Los Santos as a character here is also noteworthy. It refers less to the city as an active agent than to a certain spirit it conveys; this character has a particular character, so to speak. Such a logic operates on the notion that a place has specific affective properties that define its effect on the people who encounter it, which are then perceived as the place's character (cf. Jivén and Larkham). Compare to Murray's characterization Seth Schiesel's review of *GTA IV* in the *New York Times*:

> But the real star of the game is the city itself. It looks like New York. It sounds like New York. It feels like New York. Liberty City has been so meticulously created it almost even smells like New York. From Brooklyn (called Broker), through Queens (Dukes), the

> Bronx (Bohan), Manhattan (Algonquin) and an urban slice of New Jersey (Alderney), the game's streets and alleys ooze a stylized yet unmistakable authenticity.

Here Liberty City is a star not a character, but this ultimately amounts to the same thing. And just as was the case with Los Santos and Los Angeles, there is no doubt that Liberty City "*feels like* New York" (emphasis added) – that is, there is a sense of realistic representation even as the videogame's city is entirely fictional. In other words, "there is no more striking similitude than that between the Liberty City of *GTA IV* and New York City" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 170). Tom Bissell calls Liberty City "a carefully arranged series of visual riffs on how New York City looks and feels rather than a street-by-street replication" (172), thus echoing Bogost's and Klainbaum's argument about *San Andreas*'s Los Santos, and he even recounts how it made him, an ex-New Yorker, "less homesick for the city" (172). Another *New York Times* blog contribution even endeavored to list the in-game equivalents of iconic places in New York City (Lee). The resolute assumption that there are certain characteristic qualities – that New York City does indeed look, sound, feel, and smell like this or that and nothing else – are at work underneath accounts like Schiesel's and Bissell's, once again. It is this very reasoning that both enables *Grand Theft Auto*'s convincing urban simulations – if it can be defined, it can be reproduced – and sustains a continuing fetishization or mythicization of iconic American cities defined as much by simulation as by brick and mortar.

Remarkably, *Grand Theft Auto*'s compelling creation of a sense of (a real) place can also be found operating in an account that expresses the author's disappointment with *GTA V*'s Los Santos. In his piece for *Kotaku*, Mark Serrels explains why he prefers *GTA IV* over *GTA V* and expresses his "feeling that *Grand Theft Auto V* is a step back." This has a lot to do with Los Santos and how its massive scale structures gameplay in a particular way that, in Serrels's opinion, discourages losing oneself in the city. Toward the end of his text, he boils part of the problem down to the ways in which he plays each of the two games:

> In Grand Theft Auto IV I walked. I walked because it felt as though the game often encouraged me to walk. In a city like Liberty City you *could* walk. There were taxis everywhere. I rarely drove in Grand Theft Auto IV and that provided me with the time and space to appreciate and fall in love with the universe . . . .
>
> In Grand Theft Auto V you drive. You always drive. You can choose to walk but there is never a sense that you should. It never feels encouraged. Your mission points are dotted throughout a massive sprawling city and moving on foot requires a massive commitment.

While Serrels's sentiment is well-taken, the more interesting point is that his description shows how excellently both games appear to capture their real-world inspirations. In this sense, you can walk in Liberty City, because New York City is a city that encourages walking as well; you take taxis in Liberty City, because that

is what you do in New York City – not to mention public transportation. By the same token, it seems logical that you drive in Los Santos because you have to drive to really get anywhere in Los Angeles. Bogost and Klainbaum succinctly point out the city's "generally unrivaled car culture" during their discussion of why it makes sense to set a largely driving-based game here:

> As William J. Mitchell says of the city, "It never feels quite right to walk around Los Angeles. It's not just that the streets aren't pedestrian friendly; it's also that you can't get to know the city that way. The scale is too large, you're moving too slowly . . . . You need a car – preferably air-conditioned, with a good sound system" . . . . The primary experience of the city comes at the wheel of the automobile. (166)

In this reading, Serrels has it the wrong way round: Los Santos does invite exploration, but it must be exploration by car. You cannot really walk the city because it so closely resembles Los Angeles. If this kind of exploration seems less compelling to players like Serrels, the fault is, perhaps, less with the videogame than with the city of Los Angeles.

Eventually, *Grand Theft Auto*'s implications and entanglements in the popular imaginary of the American city – from their inspiration by popular culture to their successful rendering of genuine sensations of place – comes full circle as the real and the simulated cities amalgamate even for the videogames' creators. Kushner outright romanticizes this in his account of Sam Houser's trip to Edinburgh to oversee the final stages in the development of *GTA IV*:

> Yet through it all, this amazing city remained. New York. The place he'd dreamed of as a kid sitting in his bedroom listening to Slayer. Now the city was his to share. Decoded. Replicated. Simulated. A living, breathing world on a disc that anyone could play. For weeks, he had been in Edinburgh, immersed in Liberty City, but now, as New York City towered above him, something shifted inside him. Why doesn't this feel different? he wondered. Then it hit him. It didn't feel different because the simulated world had come so vividly to life. "I didn't feel like I'd left," he realized, "because I'd been here the whole time." (267–268)

It seems as if even *Grand Theft Auto*'s mastermind falls under the spell of the "ludodrome" (Atkinson and Willis 820) produced by his own creation.

To conclude this section, one can say that *Grand Theft Auto* participates in and, indeed, reinforces a longstanding practice of simulating the American city to the extent that excessive mediation has largely supplanted the real-world location in the popular imaginary. Through the double logic of reproducing common representations and simultaneously aspiring to capture a presumed essence of their real-life models, the series' cities provide compelling experiences of place. This double logic is repeatedly affirmed in accounts of different *Grand Theft Auto* titles, as commentators point out the cultural references on which they draw while at the same time insisting that the virtual cities feel just like the real ones. 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. In this manifestation of playing American by both producers and players, *Grand Theft Auto* participates in a continuing, transmedial simulation of iconic urban locales as it continues and amplifies the representational work of previous texts and their creation of a common urban imaginary in relation to larger-than-life cities like Los Angeles and New York City. This work is continued in accounts by scholars, journalists, and other commentators who constantly reiterate the gameworlds' realistic feel in the face of their apparent entanglement in a web of intertextual references, thereby further mythicizing already hypermediated American cities.

## 2.3 Ambient Operations and Cultural Agencies: The World of *GTA V*

To conclude this chapter and bring the guiding concept of this book back into the discussion, I will demonstrate how the agencies identified above permeate the gameworld of *GTA V*, the latest *Grand Theft Auto* title, specifically in its ambient operations. Thus far, we have seen how American popular culture has shaped *Grand Theft Auto* from its earliest days and how, subsequently, the series itself has worked on American culture. As indicated earlier, these agencies not only flow into and out of the games, they operate inside them as well; indeed, they often play crucial roles in prompting and shaping accounts like the ones scrutinized above. Playing American, as defined before, encompasses practices of production, gameplay, and reception alike.

This section examines how the ambient operations in *GTA V*'s gameworld work along similar lines as the matters of concern that have emerged around the series at large. This is not to say that these are the only matters expressed through such operations in the videogame; the point here is not to make the argument that certain kinds of ambient operations – or rather, certain concerns expressed through ambient operations – would be more important to the gameplay experience of *GTA V* or resonate more strongly with American culture than others. Instead, the goal here is to illustrate how the particular agencies discussed in this chapter can be found at work inside *GTA V* as well. This, however, also means that the instances discussed in the following paragraphs are not necessarily the only ones expressing a respective matter of concern; there may be, and probably are, more, but this does not affect the general argument proposed here. In short, the final section of this chapter thus completes the description of *Grand Theft*

*Auto* as an actor-network with an individual videogame as one example of a node that can be described as part of this actor-network; the following pages should hence be taken as exemplary analyses which stand in for the workings of a larger dynamic system.

Because of the nature of *GTA V*, where disparate themes, situations, and activities constantly fade into each other, I do not go through the matters of concern identified before one after the other. Instead, this subchapter is organized by focusing on three exemplary clusters of ambient operations, each discussed in some detail, which oftentimes speak to more than one of the concerns at stake. In the following, I scrutinize the in-game broadcast media, the events surrounding non-player characters in the streets of Los Santos, and the non-mission side activities available to the player.

While radio programming has been included in *Grand Theft Auto* from the very beginning, in-game television first appeared in *GTA IV*. The difference between the two broadcast media in the series, not unlike in real life nowadays, is that they work in different contexts, which also means that they constitute different kinds of ambient operations. While players need to actively seek out a TV in the game – they can be found in each of the characters' homes in *GTA V* – radio plays by default every time the player enters and drives a car, making it the central ambient operation of the game. Hence, television is more akin to any other side activity in *GTA V*, whereas radio ventures more closely to the atmospheric. Both do not really invite player action in the way many other ambient operations discussed in this book do; one can switch channels and stations, and perhaps play around with the musical oeuvre to, for example, match the soundtrack to one's style of playing the game (cf. K. Miller, "Jacking" 424–425), but that is about it. Hence, they work mainly on a representational level rather than a procedural one. Nonetheless, in-game radio and television are vital in grounding the events on the screen in a particular context and in infusing the entire world of *Grand Theft Auto* with a distinct meaning. That is to say, they are first and foremost world-building devices and agents of distinction that set *Grand Theft Auto* apart from other videogames of the same genre. Although both radio and television function somewhat differently from a conceptual perspective, their roles in the game's meaning-making processes – and, hence, in the flows of the agencies of American culture – are quite similar. With several hours of both television and radio programming in *GTA V*, potential examples of their work abound, but I limit my discussion here to a few examples standing in for a larger corpus of material, all of which specifically relate to the matters of concern carved out before.

Generally, as major actors in *Grand Theft Auto*'s production of a particular brand of humor that oscillates between the vulgar (and often bro-esque) and the parodistic-satirical (slipping into cynicism), which often addresses political issues,

both television and radio (besides the music programming) largely consist of a variety of (talk) shows and commercials which draw caricatures of all kinds of things along the political spectrum. Examples for TV shows include the cartoons "Impotent Rage" and "Republican Space Rangers" on the channels CNT and Weazel, which make fun of Liberals and Conservatives, respectively. One of Weazel's catchphrase as heard in *GTA V*, for example, goes: "Weazel News: Confirming your prejudices!" The channels' names obviously insinuate CNN and Fox, matching the political positioning of their real-life counterparts, while CNT arguably also alludes to the slur 'cunt,' which neatly encapsulates the kind of humor *Grand Theft Auto* predominately works with. All of the matters of concern suffusing *Grand Theft Auto* that I have sketched out above are addressed, mainly in caricatural terms, in *GTA V*'s broadcast program in various ways. Each is highlighted here through at least one example that could just as well be replaced by several others from the videogame, ranging from commercials to comments by radio show hosts.

One of the fictional in-game brands in *GTA V* is Bravado, invoking the iconic American car manufacturer Dodge – known particularly for high-powered pick-up trucks as well as muscle and sports cars – through the design of its logo and some of the cars players can drive in the game, which are reminiscent of the Charger and Ram types, among others. Bravado is represented by two radio and two TV commercials in *GTA V*, all of which present the same type of parody of American consumer culture. I quote one of each in their entirety here because they pertain to several matters of concern raised in this chapter. First, the general television ad – general because there is another one for a specific type called Bison:

> [Dramatic music and distinctly American imagery; narrator speaks with a lot of pathos and a heavy American accent] This is America. Our fires burn bright, especially in the trash barrels that keep people warm, or after a riot because there's no jobs. America is hurting. We're at each other's throats, wondering if this country can ever come back from the abyss, while bankers loot the coffers. The thing about steel: it's hot and cold at the same time, like a woman or lady happiness [*Grand Theft Auto*'s equivalent of the statue of liberty]. We made the problems and we're solving them together, because we're in this together, which is why it's only right *you're* paying for the mistakes *we* made, together. Sub-par cars and overly entitled executives, together we are holding on to the Dream. That dream is luxury and a gas-guzzling luxury car, created in a nation that's 95 percent condemned. We haven't forgotten what America wants: a hunk of overpriced shit that goes fast and gets you vapid pussy. Bravado: united we stand, together we fall. [Credits at the end read: "Thanks for the bailout, America. Your tax dollars paid for this commercial."]

Before I identify some of the central points relevant to this chapter, here is the transcript of the radio commercial:

> [The same dramatic music and speaker] At Bravado, we don't just make cars, we make America. Farms, fields, football, and getting together with some old friends. It's a diner where the waitress knows your name and gives you a handjob. It's a parade on Main Street, with children cheering as their parents' jobs get outsourced overseas to get done by illiterate kids. It's a slow-motion shot of your kids, running happy on the beach, ignoring the dead mammals and stricken sea-birds washing up from the latest oil spill. Our fires burn bright, especially when you're breaking apart furniture and burning it in a barrel to keep warm, while your wife turns tricks to buy food. We know America is hurting. We're in this together, which is why we want you to tell your Congressmen to approve our newest bailout. Bravado: United we stand, together we fall.

The most apparent concern that runs through both commercials is arguably global, neoliberal (and, hence, finance-dominated) capitalism and its effects on the American people, particularly the working middle class. Unlike the game-world and its NPCs as such, which draws a picture of what America looks like, in several facets, after more than three decades of neoliberalism, such pieces of in-game broadcasting function as micronarratives verbalizing particular aspects of the dynamics at play here. Both Bravado commercials, for example, explicitly draw attention to a bailout, clearly insinuating the auto industry bailout after the 2008 financial crisis. It is worth repeating that this was indeed a financial crisis in the first instance, caused by reckless practices in the banking sector and the building up and bursting of credit bubbles. That this would lead to the need for the state to bail out car manufacturers highlights not only how the financial sector has become the dominant economic factor under neoliberalism but also who is acting as surety in times of crisis: the working people of the United States (and elsewhere). The first ad explicitly addresses bankers' profits in the face of widespread homelessness and unemployment as well the fact that it is mainly a small economic elite at the top which profits from neoliberal policies and business practices (cf. Hacker and Pierson). The stand-out line here – and it is impossible to reproduce in writing the pointed way in which it is uttered in *GTA V*, hitting hard precisely because of its matter-of-fact sense of understatement and concurrent pathos – is clearly: "We made the problems and we're solving them together, [pause] because we're in this together, [pause] which is why it's only right *you're* paying for the mistakes *we* made, [short pause] together." This sentence alone perfectly encapsulates the reality of corporate capitalist practice under neoliberalism, replicating stock PR maneuvers at the same time as it highlights the obscene ways in which responsibility is collectivized in times of crisis while yield is always individualized and oriented toward the top. Moments like these do, without a doubt, carry a punch, and they are the reason why some have been crediting *Grand Theft Auto* with satirical force. I have a few words to say about this

popular image of the series in a moment, but only after I discuss a few more examples since the question of satire pertains to all of them collectively.

Another matter of concern that regularly appears across a number of broadcast programs in *GTA V* is structural racism, though it is generally not the sole or major focus, as capitalism was in the Bravado commercials.

> [Speaker yells aggressively; hard rock plays in the background] We all love authority. Isn't it time you became an authority figure? Have you always wanted to get paid to stand around and yell at minorities and rapists? The West Coast leads the country in correctional facilities. Locking away half the population means a career opportunity for you. Become a correctional officer! Priors no problem. We think highly of people who have been involved in violent altercations in the workplace. Here it helps! And once you join the correctional officers' union, you can't get fired, even if you're muling drugs to sell to inmates. Be part of the one team that's definitely winning the War on Crime. P.I.C.: Join the Prison-Industrial Complex today!

Though addressed explicitly only in a single half sentence, this portrayal of the American phenomenon of mass incarceration summons the specter of what Michelle Alexander has called "the New Jim Crow" (11), the structural factors that disproportionately embroil African Americans in this system. "Locking away half the population," then, while clearly an attempt at satirical exaggeration, overlooks the fact that this is not a sample proportionate to the ethnic composition of the American people. In this sense, the systemic-racist component, though present, gets lost amid the various other characterizations attributed to the prison-industrial complex here. Yet invoking this phenomenon in the first place undeniably carries the baggage of its racist as well as capitalist anatomy, whether visible or not. In other words: when the prison-industrial complex finds its way into the world of *Grand Theft Auto* – in terms of gameplay, Los Santos' Bolingbroke Penitentiary only plays a role in *GTA V*'s online mode – the issue of structural racism inevitably does so, too, even if only as an absent presence.

A second ad for the prison-industrial complex, however, not only doubles down on some of the points raised in the first but also makes explicit what remained implied in the first:

> [Same aggressive manner] You wanna own a successful franchise. You wanna make money. [Sound of a cash register] What do you invest in? Fast food? Frozen yoghurt? [Sound of a buzzer] Their fats, they'll soon go out of fashion! What's the one growth business in America? Isn't it time you got into the one industry where we're giving the Chinese a real run for their money? Correctional institutions! [Hard rock starts playing in the background] At P.I.C., we'll help you get set up with your own franchise. Running your own prison is easy, it's the one business where you really do have a captive audience. Lock 'em up, throw away the key, and watch the profits roll in. You can guarantee a steady stream of new inmates: We give generously to local and national politicians to ensure stiff penalties for all manner of crimes rather than rehabilitation. Help clean up the streets and make a tidy profit. We'll

> have America back the way *we* want it to be: white, paranoid, and happy to burn anyone that looks different. Contact P.I.C. today and get your introductory kit on investing in your own prison franchise. The Prison-Industrial Complex, a real American success story that *they* can't outsource.

The (neoliberal) capitalist motivation, the implications of the War on Crime, the abandonment of the ethos of rehabilitation, they are all there, but what distills the systemic racism inherent in the phenomenon of contemporary mass incarceration into a quasi-mission statement here is the verbalization of its reactionary, white-supremacist impetus: "We'll have America back the way *we* want it to be: white, paranoid, and happy to burn anyone that looks different." Through this statement as well as calling the prison-industrial complex by its name, the ad synecdochically presents mass incarceration as the symptom of a systemic racism that ultimately serves to ensure white rule in the United States. At the same time, however, it once more does not take center stage but is instead embedded in a succession of statements attempting to ridicule the profit-oriented motivations behind the prison-industrial complex, which somewhat overshadows the central role played by racism. Nonetheless, this example shows how this matter of concern remains at work in *GTA V* in the form of the ambient operation of the fictional radio program.

While the rather diffuse matter of concern I have called shifting paradigms and characterized through the keywords 'art,' 'attention,' and 'attitudes' is difficult to detect in *GTA V* simply because it is so diffuse and consists of so many heterogeneous elements, it is at least worth considering the points raised in the previous pages in light of this more elusive matter of concern. As indicated before, it is precisely the kind of radio and TV programming addressed above which produces the satirical elements that, in the eyes of many commentators, have endowed *Grand Theft Auto* with a quality transcending mere entertainment and capable of addressing political and social issues in a playful yet critical manner. As seen earlier in this chapter, the perceived social commentary, whether termed satire or not, is at the heart of why *Grand Theft Auto* has been perceived as a series of videogames capable of producing entertaining content that engages serious issues in a manner comparable to that seen in other forms of culture long before videogames (cf. Wills, "Ain't" 1–3). Some critics, however, point out that, if *GTA V* is satire at all, it is "failed satire" at best (Bigras and Hubbell). Rather than satire, the game's representational modus operandi in fact appears to be cynicism. As *GTA V*'s parodistic representations lash out in all directions, punching left and right as well as up but also – and this is the crux of the matter – down, the game appears as an equal-opportunity offender in which seemingly anything is game to ridicule. It is the American people in its entirety who are the butt of the joke, not just the ruling elites. This, however, does not leave any position for

the videogame itself to retreat to; it does not take a stand. This impression is reinforced by the apparent general retreat of any kind of seriousness when it comes to social issues, which had still informed predecessors *GTA IV* and *San Andreas*, in *GTA V*.

A notable exception, in my view, is the mission "By the Book." This mission includes a much-criticized and now infamous torture scene, in which Trevor – one of the three playable protagonists, who is consistently depicted as a violent sociopath throughout the main story line – tortures an alleged terrorist to gather intel for federal law enforcement. The mission ends with Trevor letting the ultimately innocent victim live while delivering a long monologue about the uselessness of torture to gain information. In a gameworld where violent deaths are the norm, then, the character that embodies the cruelty of this world most perfectly chooses to save a stranger's life while providing the most explicit critical statement in a videogame that largely lives on implied social commentary, thus providing the critical self-positioning necessary for satire to take effect. It is revealed to the player that the whole procedure was, in fact, unnecessary. There is a break, a rupture, a contradiction of expectations – for all the times the player throughout the entire *Grand Theft Auto* series had to get rid of characters who had "outlived their usefulness," it does not happen here. Instead, a space for "*ethical gameplay*" emerges (Sicart 24). Players are encouraged to reflect on the violence they just enacted. Altogether four instances of torture, it seems, are necessary during the mission to identify a target for assassination – another alleged terrorist. As it turns out, however, one can – with a bit of luck – take a successful shot after the second one already. Yet nothing cues players into this, so what they will most likely do is to follow the game's instructions compliantly, indeed to play "by the book." By thus compelling the player to reenact state-sanctioned torture, the game invites players to ponder their own complicity in the atrocities happening under the guise of defending freedom and democracy and in the spectacles of violence that ensue.

Beyond this and perhaps a few other exceptions, *GTA V*'s cynical mode of ridiculing everything without suggesting any outside position that could possibly offer hope or a sense of redemption ultimately does not amount to any kind of critical politics and arguably does revert back to mere entertainment – in this sense, *GTA V*'s parodies are mostly only for laughs, obstructing the videogame's satirical potential.

Moving on to another type of ambient operation, one of the key devices that turns especially the newer *Grand Theft Auto* titles into such lively, and also somewhat plausible, worlds is the way non-player characters in the gameworld act without the player's involvement as part of the "*ambience act*" (Galloway, *Gaming* 10) In *GTA V*, players encounter countless characters in the streets of Los Santos, who in-

teract with each other (and the player) in various ways. These interactions are, next to in-game radio, the second major ambient operation in *Grand Theft Auto*.

When I write that these non-player character interactions make the city of Los Santos appear alive and buzzing, I immediately enter the discourse regarding *Grand Theft Auto*'s simulation of mythic American cities outlined before. Part of what drives the discourse are geography and visual style, but the rest is really the characters. *GTA V*'s Los Santos appears alive because players encounter particular types in particular places behaving in particular ways. Yoga-practicing newly-rich in Rockford Hills, homeless men seeking shelter under overpasses in Mission Row, and gangbangers pushing drugs in Davis; the city's non-player characters create a sense of distinct neighborhoods with their own individual vibes. These vibes are precisely what is at work in the accounts of *Grand Theft Auto*'s cities; they make them feel palpable and somehow real in their reminiscence of actual American cities, in this case Los Angeles. Yet the characters in their interplay with their individual environments in Los Santos are caricatures, by and large – which does not mean that Los Angeles may not produce such caricatures in its actual residents itself. They replicate images of Los Angeles as presented by Hollywood movies, themselves exaggerations of aspects of the real city, which is why being in "Los Santos isn't like being in the lived Los Angeles; rather it is more like being in an LA film" (Murray, "Grand"). Estranged couples arguing with each other in public, gangbangers antagonizing the player character for staring at them, wannabe film stars telling their friends about their latest audition, and so on. These are stereotypical characters doing and saying stereotypical things and interacting with the player character in stereotypical ways; yet they never feel too odd or even out of place.

These characters and interactions make sense to players not only because they all work in concert to create the tapestry of Los Santos but also because they are recognizable. And they are recognizable precisely because they fit within the popular imaginary of the city of Los Angeles as formed by Hollywood and its companions; most players will have seen such characters do and say similar things before. Their effectiveness lies in their nature as ambient operations: as players explore Los Santos, they are continuously surrounded by these characters, who will also regularly react to the player character and his actions in their own individual (yet stereotypical) ways. These characters are a crucial part of *GTA V*'s background noise, if you will. In this way, the myth of Los Angeles, as it has been ingrained in popular culture, spawns the figures who populate the streets of Los Santos. We do not get to see the actual variety of Angelenos and Angelenas found in all corners of the real Los Angeles, but instead we encounter the types perpetuated by popular culture, and we encounter them constantly and always where a pop culture-savvy audience would expect them. It is in this way that the simulac-

ral city of Los Santos manages to evoke genuine feelings of its apparent real-life inspiration, for natives of the city and those who have never set foot in it alike, while it simultaneously continues the work of the myth of Los Angeles as a place collectively imagined by an international audience of American popular culture.

While the stereotyping that suffuses *GTA V* as well as its predecessors is one of the reasons *Grand Theft Auto* is frequently criticized for its perceived racism, this chapter has also demonstrated that some commentators are prompted to address larger issues of structural racism by way of reading certain constellations in the videogames as expressive of real-world concerns. In this context, the ambient operations in the predominately non-white neighborhoods of Los Santos – for example, Davis, Strawberry, and Rancho – are shot through with the logics of systemic racism and are thus heavily shaped by the agency of a specifically American brand of racism. The behavior of the Los Santos Police Department is a case in point here. Police cars are present in all areas of the city; as described before, the police and its disciplining of the player are central to the gameplay concept of *Grand Theft Auto*. Consequently, police react in the same way to player actions wherever they occur; location does not seem to matter here. Since *GTA V* features an ambioperative gameworld, however, police does not only act in response to the player character, it engages non-player characters as well. These interactions, in turn, are among the most remarkable expressions of systemic racism found in the world of *GTA V*. While the police are indeed present in the entire city, they only ever seem to act without the player's doing in the poorer, largely non-white districts. Interestingly, this seems to be a departure from the depiction of the same areas in *San Andreas*. Writing on the latter, Murray highlights, for example, how "Ganton, the protagonist's home turf, is ramshackle and has the sad, dilapidated, sagging appearance of a crime-riddled, forgotten place. Notably, the authorities rarely venture onto this block, whereas the police presence in affluent areas is more visible and aggressive" ("High" 95). Likewise, Leonard laments the frequent inaction of law enforcement in *San Andreas*:

> Throughout the game, the police ignore the murder of other "gang members," often intervening only in moments where violence is directed at the "innocent." In other words, Carl can, at times, kill rival gang members in front (or close to) police without consequences. Killing an innocent citizen brings the police swiftly and with the full force of the law. Furthermore, as these individuals lie in the street in virtual wait for medical attention, the paramedics rarely arrive." ("Virtual Gangstas" 61–62)

Both authors paint a picture of a community largely ignored or given up on by the authorities in *San Andreas*. In *GTA V*, on the other hand, the very same neighborhoods of Los Santos can no longer be described as neglected by law enforce-

ment; quite the contrary, police are visibly present. Yet the circumstances of the interactions remain, especially during the night.

Moving through South Central Los Santos after the sun has set, players are bound to witness police activity on a scale usually reserved for their own criminal behavior. At night, police helicopters frequently roam the sky, ostensibly scanning the streets with a searchlight – literally the only other time players will see a police helicopter is in response to a severe crime committed by the player. The sirens of police cars dominate the nighttime soundscape, but they are not mere atmospheric effects resounding from a distance: the cars will appear, and they will not appear without consequence. Each time a police car arrives in one of these neighborhoods at night, there is a shootout between police officers and black men in the streets. This kind of ambient operation has two distinct implications in the context of the work of a particularly American brand of racism in *Grand Theft Auto*. On the one hand, it continues the stereotypical depiction of Black men from inner-city neighborhoods as predominately gang-affiliated (and, hence, criminal) that the series has received so much criticism for. The men shoot back at the police and there is no way for the player to find out what caused the altercation. Was there a serious offense? Is it plain racial profiling? Something else? The videogame does not provide an explanation. The shootouts are simply something that occurs regularly; they appear as natural events in these parts of Los Santos. Yet on the other hand, the scenes as witnessed by the player take on another meaning, especially when considered in relation to the way *San Andreas* presented the same neighborhoods. Despite the fact that the residents fight back, witnessing police shoot at Black men in the streets of Los Santos without any apparent reason, these events seem uncannily reminiscent of the footage of police shootings of young, generally unarmed, Black men which, despite not being a new phenomenon itself, has been circulated and reported on repeatedly and worldwide in the past few years. Viewed in this light, the recurring shootouts in *GTA V*, in the historical context of its time of publication and subsequently through their affective connections, are expressive less of gang violence – as was the case in *San Andreas* – than of racist practices in American law enforcement. Whichever way one reads it – whether as stereotypical representation or socially conscious satire – it is always the same American brand of racism that acts through the ambient operations described here. Both previous representations and a popular discourse on systemic racism in the United States flow into and work within *GTA V*, only to trigger further debates on the former outside of the game.

The final example of ambient operations suffused by the matters of concern described in this chapter I want to discuss here regards non-mission side activities in *GTA V*. Besides the various story and side missions and simply exploring Los Santos and passively taking in its occurrences, there are other activities avail-

able to the player. These are marked through various symbols on the in-game map, but they also present themselves as opportunities for action during gameplay. When the player approaches the site of one of these activities, a pop-up notification informs them about the opportunity to engage. Activities take many forms in *GTA V*, including getting tattoos and haircuts, going to the movies, and participating in various sports. The activity I examine in the following paragraphs, however, is a much more passive one: buying commercial property.

Throughout Los Santos, there are several businesses available for purchase by the protagonists, marked by a symbol of a house with a dollar sign on the in-game map and by a "For Sale" sign placed prominently in front of the actual property in the gameworld. Moving past one of these businesses, a pop-up message offers the player a chance to buy the property, but they can only do so if they have acquired enough funds beforehand. Property prices range from $80,000 for the Hen House, a small-town bar in the rural area north of Los Santos, to $150,000,000 for the Los Santos Golf Club, the latter of which is a sum that only becomes feasible after the protagonists have completed a number of high-profile heists that are part of the main story line of *GTA V*. In terms of gameplay objectives, the purchase of at least five businesses is a precondition for a 100 percent completion of the videogame. The more interesting aspect here, however, is that, once owned, each of these businesses automatically generates a weekly income that goes straight into the owner's balance except in a few cases like the LSPD Auto Impound, which depends on the player's acquisition efforts. Occasionally, the businesses' managers will contact the protagonist who owns the business and ask him for help with something, like securing alcohol deliveries for a bar, which the player can always decline without sanction. Other than that, these establishments play no role in actual gameplay once purchased.

The relevance of the ambient operation of business investment in the context of this chapter is the investment and profit logic behind it. Besides minor perks like free access to certain kinds of vehicles, the main purpose of the purchasable businesses in *GTA V* is to return the investment and generate more money. This is remarkable not only because, by the time players have earned enough money to invest in property, they already have more than they ever need to spend in the gameworld; there are only so many clothes to buy, only so many car customizations available, only so many weapons needed to succeed in and outside of missions, and so on. More importantly, it is a prime example of how the logic of neoliberalism, in particular financialization, permeates *GTA V* in its ambient operations. One of the central features of neoliberalism in practice has been the deregulation of the financial system and the rise of finance capitalism to the top of the capitalist food chain (cf. Harvey 161–162). Investing in property in *GTA V* reproduces the neoliberal myth of 'making your money work for you' as returns are guaranteed and no effort on the

part of the player necessary (unless they wish to engage in helping the managers with their problems). In this way, generating profit becomes an end in itself, and an entirely non-ludic one, too, since there is no plausible intrinsic ludic motivation for doing so built into the game. Players invest their in-game money simply because they can, because it is the thing to do.

A similar gameplay mechanic first appeared in *Vice City*, as Dyer Witheford and de Peuter describe:

> Assets generate an ongoing stream of reward, wealth – a feature that, as one *GTA* player describes, "makes your money more useful." . . . Possession unlocks new commercial possibilities for you in Vice City. This is a world where access to, mobility in, and knowledge of urban territory are complexly tied to accumulation's advance: how much city there is for you as player depends on how much money you have. But what makes *Vice City* properly neoliberal is that, as your financial tally rises, there is not a hint of labor, just the abstracted, increasing magnitude of accumulated capital. (163)

Unless one counts the player's reaction to calls for help by the managers, "there is [still] not a hint of labor" in *GTA V*'s investment schemes. Profits add to the protagonist's balance as if by magic, and the ways in which money seems to simply breed more money appear as the natural way of the world. Players do not get to know who works at these businesses besides the managers, what the work entails, who the customers are, or how they turn a profit anyway. What they learn about, however, is the price of the property and the profits it makes. In short, there is "just the abstracted, increasing magnitude of accumulated capital" and this is all that matters. The protagonists' commercial property, by the way, is managed by a firm called Minotaur Investment and Finance, which sends the protagonists one e-mail per week informing them of their profits and which is otherwise entirely invisible, which adds to a sense of finance as somehow entirely virtual and yet producing extraordinary amounts of value.

Finally, as if the curiosity of business ownership for the sake of profit without ludic action alone were not enough, there is a second ambient operation in *GTA V* that ventures even further into the world of finance and capital investment: the stock market. Using a computer or the protagonist's smartphone, players can invest their in-game money in one of two in-game stock exchanges, the BAWSAQ (an obvious and juvenile pun on the NASDAQ and the term 'ballsack') and the LCN (the Liberty City National Exchange), both of which first appeared in *GTA IV*. Both indexes list many famous companies that have played prominent roles in *Grand Theft Auto*, from gun retailer Ammu-Nation to fast food chain BurgerShot. In a much-simplified simulation of actual stock exchanges, the stock values in these indexes fluctuate in accordance with certain events within and outside of the market. The BAWSAQ values are influenced by player behavior in *GTA Online*, *GTA V*'s online mode – if many players buy guns in the online game, the value of

Ammu-Nation shares goes up – whereas those of the LCN are tied to events in the singleplayer story mode. For example, there are several missions in which private security contractor Merryweather Security is the antagonist; upon completion of these missions, Merryweather stocks will decline in value.

Hence, unlike the guaranteed investment of owned businesses, the stock market actually has to be observed and read by the player in order to make any profit. Still no hint of labor in the values of individual stocks, yet effort on the part of the player is necessary in order to 'play' the stock market. In some instances, especially a series of assassination missions, players can, in fact, make use of insider knowledge in predicting the imminent performance of particular stocks – if an important figure in one of the companies is the target, this means that its value will decline after the assassination, while that of its main competitor will go up. Although investing in stocks is an entirely optional activity and not necessary to progress in the main story, as an ambient operation showing up on the screens of protagonists' devices and being referenced by in-game broadcast announcements, the stock market appears as a central aspect of the world projected by *GTA V*; even if only in the background, it frequently catches the player's attention by operating in their environment. When engaged, the game turns into something akin to a stock market simulator as it transforms capital investment and stock trading into gameplay, perfectly guided by the neoliberal impulses that inform the gameworld at large. Even the logic of self-reliance is at play here since players themselves are responsible for making the most profitable decisions on the market. Unlike the solid, foreseeable return of investment presented by business ownership in the game, trading stocks can both cost protagonists money and make them much richer within a very short time.

## 2.4 Conclusion: Playing American in *Grand Theft Auto*

Having traced some of the agencies of American culture flowing into, through, and out of *Grand Theft Auto*, some conclusions can be drawn about the series' cultural work in relation to American culture, which goes beyond simply placing gameplay in an obviously American setting. The phenomenon of playing American at the core of the series' cultural work manifests itself in three distinct ways, one for each of the three flows that organize the previous subchapters – the 'into,' the 'out of,' and the 'within,' if you will.

First, there is the phenomenon of American popular culture flowing into the videogames at the time of *GTA*'s development. As these reference points came to define the series at large, despite being created by British developers and with no significant material ties to the United States, DMA Design's/Rockstar Games' opus

magnum somehow ended up appearing genuinely American. On this view, one could say that *Grand Theft Auto* has played American from the start, in the sense that it succeeded in creating the appearance of something perceived as somehow American; the series *acts* American, as it were, even though it is not, at least not technically. To this day, I frequently hear expressions of astonishment when people learn that *Grand Theft Auto* is not originally from the United States. "Wait, I didn't know it was British!" people would exclaim. This, in turn, leads back to an issue raised at the very beginning of this chapter: whether and, if yes, in how far, one can attribute the cultural affiliation of a work of culture to its geographical origin, or whether the multifarious, transnational entanglements of today's cultural productions do not drastically complicate this matter. Considering the case of *Grand Theft Auto* as delineated in this chapter, an ascription as 'American culture' must be based on networks of meaning and cultural practices rather than geography or the creators' citizenships. The *Grand Theft Auto* videogames are what they are, and whichever way players perceive them is how they perceive them. What matters is that they work; they work upon their audience, and they work upon American culture. The fact that the series originated in the United Kingdom should not change our understanding of what we see and experience in these videogames – it should, however, change our understanding of what American culture is, how it is circulated, and how it is ultimately reproduced. What was indicated in the introduction is confirmed by *Grand Theft Auto* and the other videogames studied here: American culture itself does not inherently belong to the United States only; it is, instead, a transnational product based on perceptions, ascriptions, and projections, all of which are in constant exchange with each other. Videogames are an important agent of this process in the twenty-first century.

Second, there are the actors and actions – that is, written accounts – set in motion by *Grand Theft Auto* and their participation in "the repetition and variation of narratives" central to the ongoing existence of something like American culture (Kelleter, "From" 99). Beyond representation in the individual videogames, *Grand Theft Auto* performs work on American culture as it prompts numerous commentators to talk about particular and recurring matters of concern, from structural racism to hypermediated American cities, thus maintaining ongoing discourses, reproducing and varying existing narratives, and at times, as in the case of the view of videogames in American culture, actively changing discourses as well. Thus, *Grand Theft Auto* can be seen as playing American also in the manner it influences some of the ways in which America talks about and describes itself based on the America projected by the videogames. Some of the cultural work of *Grand Theft Auto*, then, can be located in these communicative practices, which are an indispensable aspect of American culture in practice and especially of its reproduction. It must be stressed here that reproduction is not

replication in the sense of duplication; rather, it always involves variation, so that the product will differ from the source material to different degrees. Some of it may lead to more of the same, thus sustaining an existent discourse, and some of it may lead toward new avenues, thus bringing about changes in certain states of affairs. Both dynamics are visible in *Grand Theft Auto*'s actor-network: the simulation of American metropoles appears more like a continuation, while the changing public perception of videogames is definitely a substantial shift in American culture. Both dynamics are vital to the reproduction of American culture, which persists in perpetual change. *Grand Theft Auto*, I contend, plays its part in this process, so the meaning of the videogames that is significant is less the content that has stirred up so many controversies and more the work done by those controversies and other reactions to the series within the assemblage of American culture; this is the cultural work of *Grand Theft Auto*.

Third, there are the manifold ways in which the agencies of American culture inform *Grand Theft Auto*'s ambioperative gameworlds and the player's interactions with these worlds. This was shown exemplarily for *GTA V*, the gameworld of which is shot through with the agencies of American culture, those sketched out in this chapter and others not addressed here. Not only do the videogame's ambient operations address or even replicate certain perceived aspects of American culture, they also prompt players to act in accordance with some of its dominant features, such as the logics of neoliberalism and consumerism. The player is, therefore, clearly playing American in *GTA V*; player actions are guided in ways that are arguably American or at least intimately tied to contemporary American culture, regardless of the cultural background of players themselves. It is, of course, always possible to play against the grain (or, rather, the game) in this regard, to resist or even subvert what it urges one to do; yet the fact that the videogames promote certain courses of action over others remains. Playing American, as it were, is the default setting of these videogames. Playing *Grand Theft Auto*, then, is playing American, and playing American, as we shall continue to see, is at the center of the cultural work of the videogames and ambioperative gameworlds examined in this book.

# 3 (Anti-)Black Boxes, Black Bodies, and Surveillance as Gameplay: *Watch Dogs*' Ambivalent Politics

At the push of a button, I am inside the camera, high up at the corner of the building complex. In fact, I am the camera now, its gaze has become mine. Another push of a button and my field of vision turns into a grid of possible connections. A passerby appears. His profile tells me that he is a massage therapist who collects stuffed animals. I access his bank account and transfer $220 to my own. There is another camera, this one inside the complex, which was hidden from my view before. As I enter it, my gaze is now inside. I can see the security guards, but they cannot see me since, unlike my gaze, I am nowhere near them. They are armed and can call for immediate reinforcements if necessary, so a direct confrontation would be futile. Pushing another button, I access and change the digital citizen profile of one of them. He does not know it yet, but he is now a "cop killer." As I hear the sirens approaching, I prepare to move forward. The police arrive, and the violent altercation which ensues allows me to proceed. Nobody will ever know I was here.

The first two installments of Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* franchise (released in 2014 and 2016) were, like *Grand Theft Auto*, developed outside the United States; publisher Ubisoft is based in France, and the responsible studio, Ubisoft Montreal, is based in Canada. Both videogames project an America in which urban surveillance is comprehensive and omnipresent, in which individuals exist primarily as digital profiles fed by algorithms processing personal data, and in which power is fundamentally tied to control of these technologies. In other words, it depicts, in a selective and accentuated way, a contemporary reality in the United States.[8] The world of *Watch Dogs* is the United States of tomorrow, in the sense that the practices referenced, represented, and enacted in the videogames are already firmly in place on a sweeping scale, while not all of the technologies depicted do exist in that form yet or have not been implemented to that extent yet. *Watch Dogs*' realism is one in principle, if not in appearance.

**8** A third part, *Watch Dogs: Legion*, was released in late 2020. It moves the setting to the United Kingdom in times of political and economic turmoil.

**Note:** Parts of chapter 3 were previously published as "Legible Bodies and the Ghosts of American History: On Racialized Surveillance in Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* Videogames" in *Video Games and/in American Studies: Politics, Popular Culture, and Populism,* edited by Mahshid Mayar and Stefan Schubert, special issue of *European Journal of American Studies,* vol. 16, no. 3, 2021. doi: https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.17324.


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In this chapter, I examine how the *Watch Dogs* games express and demand interaction with central aspects of the contemporary cultural moment through both their themes and mechanics, as well as the interplay between the two, implicating players in some of the logics and processes that fundamentally inform twenty-first century American life. *Watch Dogs*' gameworlds, narratives, and characters render common feelings, from anxieties to enthusiasm, toward an increasingly networked, digitized world into engaging videogame experiences. In doing so, both titles exhibit, I argue, a striking dissonance between the stories they (try to) tell and the practices they engender, resulting in ambivalent politics. Whereas both *WD* and *WD2* present themselves as cautionary tales about a society defined by surveillance, digital profiling, and predictive algorithms, they procedurally replicate the same logics criticized on a narrative level and actively implicate players in them. At the same time, I contend, the videogames reproduce the racialized (ine)qualities of surveillance practices in the United States on both a representational and procedural level. *Watch Dogs*' depiction of American surveillance, this chapter demonstrates, conceals the uneven application and effects of surveillance in the real world while the colorblindness of the gameworlds throws into relief the racializing nature of surveillance in the United States. Ultimately, playing *Watch Dogs* is playing American, as the videogames reproduce the logics and practices of contemporary surveillance in the United States.

My analysis of the *Watch Dogs* franchise combines considerations of its representations, its game mechanics, its explicit and implicit connections to its discursive environment, and accounts of players, reviewers, and developers. I begin with a brief overview of *Watch Dogs*' gameworlds and main story lines, considered in the context of a larger discourse around the growing influence of digital surveillance, predictive algorithms, and monopolization, delineating how the videogames aspire to convey a critical view of the impact of such ongoing developments on life in the United States. Next, analyses of two major gameplay components, with a special focus on the gameworlds' ambient operations, show how the videogames' procedural rhetoric undermines their critical potential as the gameworlds' operational logics turn the perceived surface message on its head. This critical reading sets the stage for an interrogation of *Watch Dogs*' replication of some of the racializing logics of American surveillance regimes, both historical and contemporary, in the final part of the chapter. The conclusion then summarizes the ambivalent politics of the videogames and reflects on its figuration of playing American in the context of contemporary surveillance regimes.

## 3.1 Playing the Black Box Society: *Watch Dogs*' World and Cultural Ecology

While I discuss the first two *Watch Dogs* videogames alongside each other throughout most of this chapter since their shared gameplay elements take center stage in my analysis, it makes sense to begin with brief individual overviews of both titles. Both games are third-person action-adventures set in ambioperative gameworlds that are similar in how they work but different in their settings and scripted narratives.

The *Watch Dogs* franchise was inaugurated in 2014, when *WD* was released for all major gaming platforms at the time, that is, for PC, Playstation 3, Playstation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, and Wii U. Players take on the role of Aiden Pearce, a vigilante hacker in a fictionalized, present-day Chicago. The game presents the Windy City as a so-called smart city, an "idea [which] . . . relies on the implicit assumption that urban infrastructures and everyday life are optimized . . . through technologies provided by information and communication technology (ICT) companies" (Vanolo 27). In *WD*'s Chicago, everything, from infrastructure to inhabitants, is connected via a central operating computer system called ctOS, which includes surveillance cameras on practically every corner as the central nodes in the city's surveillance network. According to *WD*'s backstory, ctOS was developed and implemented by the powerful Blume corporation – a fictional stand-in for real-world Silicon Valley powerhouses – after a hacker caused a major blackout in large parts of northeastern America in 2003. During the course of the game, in what presents itself as a mixture of dystopia and Hollywood thriller, players work to avenge the death of Aiden's niece (which happened prior to the events of the game), uncover a web of corruption, and take down a human trafficking ring. Central to both the story and the gameplay is the functioning of ctOS, to which I return.

The highly anticipated sequel, *WD2*, was released in 2016 for PC, Playstation 4, and Xbox One. Set in a fictionalized version of the San Francisco Bay Area shortly after the events of *WD*, players find themselves in a metropolitan area governed by ctOS 2.0, an upgraded version of Blume's urban operating system. Protagonist Marcus Holloway, a Black hacker falsely accused of a crime by ctOS, discovers the immense amount of data ctOS collects of the Bay Area's citizens and the malicious uses to which it is put. He joins the hacker collective DedSec, which already played a minor role in the first game, to fight the corporate forces that reach for nearly unlimited power. While, with the exception of the final mission, the player still controls only a single character in the game, a stronger emphasis is put on collaboration. Whereas Aiden is a lone wolf who relies on help only when absolutely necessary, *WD2* emphasizes that Marcus's actions are only as strong as his network; throughout the latter, Marcus constantly works together with both the inner circle and anonymous members of DedSec, and the group's computing power is even pre-

sented as depending on their number of followers, which can be increased through publicly visible activity. Over the course of *WD2*'s main story line, DedSec uncovers and makes public the insidious activities of various tech corporations as well as the FBI, eventually stopping Blume's grab for the ultimate control of global electronic communication.

Both titles are works of speculative fiction, which, as Gerald R. Lucas writes, "will often answer an implied 'What if?' question that posits an alternative reality as its primary narrative drive. The distorted or altered reality explicitly propels the narrative while implicitly challenging quotidian assumptions of reality and those forces that comprise it – history, science, technology, politics, and metaphysics" (4). The questions at the heart of *Watch Dogs* are: What if the smart city, ubiquitous surveillance of public spaces, and digital profiling based on tracking online behavior became more than comprehensive? What if they also became converged into one unified system governing an entire city, in a public-private cooperation fusing the disparate activities of corporate actors and municipal authorities? On a narrative level, both *WD* and *WD2* have to be read (and surely see themselves) as cautionary tales about the harmful effects of the unhindered, or at least unsupervised, expansion of surveillance and big data technologies, of their uncritical application to ever more areas of life, and of the monopolies emerging from such developments.

In this way, the videogames constantly speak to both expert discourses and pop cultural texts concerned with similar issues, which becomes particularly explicit in *WD2*. For example, some of the early missions in *WD2* revolve around the home electronics company Haum, which sells all sorts of smart home devices. These devices, as DedSec finds out, collect massive amounts of data on their users, which Haum sells to other companies. One of their customers is health insurance provider Proviblues, which is discovered to raise premiums on their clients based on data collected by Haum, mainly on personal habits, and justified by vague references to an obscure "risk clause" in their policies, keeping customers in the dark about the actual procedure.

The practice sketched out above is exemplary for what Frank Pasquale describes in his book *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. The book traces the ways in which computational algorithms are increasingly impacting American lives even when citizens are not aware that they do and delineates how certain algorithmic technologies have become a major source of money and power in the twenty-first century. Regarding the figure he uses to describe this kind of society, Pasquale writes that

> [t]he term "black box" is a useful metaphor . . . given its dual meaning. It can refer to a recording device, like the data-monitoring systems in planes, trains, and cars. Or it can mean a system whose workings are mysterious; we can observe its inputs and outputs, but we cannot tell how one becomes the other. We face these two meanings daily: tracked ever

> more closely by firms and government, we have no clear idea of just how far much of this information can travel, how it is used, or its consequences.(3)

The double metaphor of the black box is analytically useful since both of its sides – the collection and storage of massive amounts of information and the concealment of its operational processes – are essential characteristics of life in the "surveillance society" of the twenty-first century United States (and other societies in advanced stages of digitalization) (G. Marx 5).

The black box society as such is a particular manifestation of a larger constellation called the network society. Manuel Castells explains that "around the end of the second millennium of the common era a number of major social, technological, economic, and cultural transformations came together to give rise to a new form of society, the network society" (Castells, *Rise* xvii). While Castells' study is overwhelming in both scope and detail, it is the development of computer networks, specifically the Internet, that, in suffusing all aspects of society, proves decisive. As Castells puts it in another book: "The Internet is the fabric of our lives" (*Internet* 1). While sweeping changes in society resulting from revolutionary technological developments are not specific to this age, both the reach and speed of this latest transformation are extraordinary, as Robert Hassan elaborates: "Over the space of what was a very short Phase One of the Digital Revolution, it now seems almost unimaginable to envisage a form of capitalism, economic globalization and much of social and cultural life that does not have digital networks at its centreless centre. The revolution, in other words, has been normalized" (10). The black box society both depends on the very digital technologies that give rise to the network society and can be seen as a symptom of the latter. Without the pervasiveness of information and communication technologies and the ubiquity of always-online devices, there would not be the necessary amount of data collection, profiling, and feedback constitutional of the black box society. At the same time, its effects of confronting people with results calculated from some undefined past behavior, recorded somehow somewhere, are among the things that make the interconnectedness of the world in the information age apparent in the first place.

Any study of cultural texts in/of the black box society, therefore, needs to account for and grapple with the meaning of networks. Networks here are understood in basic terms: "In its most generalized form – the one promulgated, for instance, by network science – a network is a complex and interconnected structure made up of groups of 'nodes' that are interconnected by 'links.' The best-connected of these central nodes are called 'hubs'" (Jagoda 8). This is especially relevant in terms of what Patrick Jagoda describes as a contemporary "network imaginary" and the "*network aesthetics*" it produces (3, 5). He contends "that the problem of global connectedness cannot be understood, in our historical present,

independently of the formal features of a network imaginary. By network imaginary I mean the complex of material infrastructures and metaphorical figures that inform our experience with and our thinking about the contemporary social world" (3). This means that cultural productions, especially popular artworks such as novels, films, and videogames, fundamentally contribute to our understanding of the world as a network. One could even go so far as to say that networks only become intelligible when rendered in some kind of aesthetic form, especially since, as some argue, a network is not some particular entity, but something that emerges by way of giving an account of it. Latour, for example, writes: "Network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described" (131). As Jagoda points out, the respective "cultural works . . . use aesthetic strategies to render, intensify, and influence the way we understand and interface with a network imaginary. They enable readers, viewers, and players to think about networks not merely by knowing or representing them but by *feeling and inhabiting* them . . . ." (28). Examining *Watch Dogs*' networks aesthetics, then, is an integral part of my analysis of the videogames in this chapter.

Zooming back in on the black box society, Pasquale's critique is directed less at the idea of big data as such, understood as the accumulation and analysis of extremely large and often heterogeneous sets of data by specialized software (Dutcher). Like all technologies, big data is neither inherently good nor bad (but also never neutral) (cf. Winner; Vaidhyanathan 4), and which certainly promises positive effects such as breakthroughs in medical research ("Power"). Rather, he is concerned mainly with the ways in which the algorithms used impact the everyday lives of Americans while they, at the same time, largely operate in secrecy and, thus, beyond independent supervision and control. Pasquale writes: "Reputation. Search. Finance. These are the areas in which Big Data looms largest in our lives. But too often it looms invisibly, undermining the openness of our society and the fairness of our markets" (5). He calls for a "qualified transparency" (161), which both avoids neutralization by obfuscation through complexity and operates within certain limits to not render ineffective, for example, counterterrorism endeavors or business principles. Asking "So why does this all matter?" he writes that "[i]t matters because authority is increasingly expressed algorithmically. Decisions that used to be based on human reflection are now made automatically" (8). That this often happens under the claim of rendering decision-making more objective can be attributed to what David Golumbia calls "*computationalism*" (*Cultural* 2). He describes this logic as "a commitment to the view that a great deal, perhaps all, of human and social experience can be explained via computational processes" and that, consequently, computers are best suited for this task, not least because they are often falsely presented as free of human bias (*Cultural*

8). While Golumbia acknowledges the positive effects of computerization, he is concerned about its more insidious downsides since "computationalism often serves the ends of entrenched power despite being framed in terms of distributed power and democratic participation" (*Cultural* 4) This is why he contends "that belief in the power of computation . . . underwrites and reinforces a surprisingly traditionalist conception of human being, society, and politics" (*Cultural* 2), one far from emancipatory, that is.

Returning to the example of Haum and Proviblues' cooperative venture in *WD2*, the videogame's depiction of their courses of action closely resembles similar real-world practices. Popular fitness and medical apps, for example, "offer unprecedented surveillance of health data, largely ungoverned by traditional health privacy laws (which focus on doctors, hospitals, and insurers)" (Pasquale 26). "Medical reputations" based on such apps as well as web searches "are being created in processes we can barely understand, let alone control . . . . Do a few searches about a disease online, fill out an (apparently unrelated) form, and you may well end up associated with that disease in commercial databases" (28). Evidently, the fictional world of *Watch Dogs* replicates in its narratives the very processes Pasquale diagnoses in American society. As the player's goal is both to make public the hidden corporate activities and to punish the managers behind them, mostly by using their own technology against them, their narrative engagement with such themes appears to pass for critique from the point of view of the videogames themselves and even some reviewers, like the *Telegraph*'s Kirk McKeand, for whom *WD2* "makes a smart statement" ("*Watch*").

The same applies to how the Blume Corporation, alongside but more important than others, figures as a fictional stand-in for the real-life giants of the tech/data industry, especially leading "surveillance capitalists" like Google and Facebook (Zuboff 8). The ways in which Blume, through ctOS and the services connected to it, suffuses all aspects of life in *Watch Dogs* speak to what Siva Vaidhyanathan, in his book of the same name, calls "[t]he Googlization of everything" (3). This process refers to an ongoing development in which "Google has permeated our culture" (Vaidhyanathan 2), to the extent that "it's almost impossible to imagine living a privileged, connected, relevant life in the early twenty-first century without Google. It has become a necessary – seemingly natural – part of our daily lives" (Vaidhyanathan 7), first through its search engine, but increasingly also through its countless other services (Vaidhyanathan 2). Vaidhyanathan's argument is one of caution and concern in the face of a growing concentration of power in one company (or even a handful of them) since "[i]f Google is the dominant way we navigate the Internet, and thus the primary lens through which we experience both the local and the global, then it has remarkable power to set agendas and alter perceptions" (7). Evidently, Google is a key figure of the black box society described by Pasquale because its "core business is

consumer profiling" and because "Google is a black box. It knows a tremendous [sic] about us, and we know far too little about it" (Vaidhyanathan 9).

In the world of *Watch Dogs*, Blume has already achieved all of the above and more, and it is actively working to shape reality according to its goals. During the course of *WD2*, players learn about the company's Bellwhether program, already briefly referenced in *WD*, which is capable of predicting trends and influencing user behaviors. After an earlier successful application in the backstory of *WD*, Blume wants to use Bellwhether to get their political puppet elected as senator with the help of social network !NViTE, a straightforward reference to Facebook. Such a plot uncannily resonates with stories like that of Cambridge Analytica, which raised eyebrows across the media landscape in early 2017, as it was purported to have played a role in both the Brexit vote and the Trump election by using big data to profile individuals online, for example on Facebook, in order to use those insights to influence the political climate in favor of the agendas of its clients (Confessore and Hakim). While the effectiveness of its method is highly disputed and while it is unlikely that it did play any major role in the two cases at hand (Taggart), the mere thought of such a machine being able to substantially influence the outcomes of real political processes had commentators worried, since what was not disputed was that such algorithms are being developed and are already well underway. These are the kinds of matters engaged most prominently by *Watch Dogs*' speculative fiction, at times blurring the lines between art imitating life and life imitating art.

In this context, and more than its prequel, *WD2* – evidently inspired by the popular satirical tone of the *Grand Theft Auto* series, the benchmark of urban open-world videogames – openly and quite self-awarely situates itself within its cultural ecology. The *Guardian*'s review of the game, for example, offers the following keen synopsis:

> [Y]ou'll take down a bunch of millionaires and mega-companies, most of [which] clearly have a basis in reality. There's a Martin Shkreli-type pharma bad boy who DedSec rips off for millions, sending the money to a medical research company. There's an occult group known as New Dawn, a mysterious organisation that manipulates people and takes their money, in a stark allegory to the Church of Scientology. You'll expose a paedophile selling indecent images, and teach the odd petty thief a lesson or two. There's a social media network called !NViTE and a Google allegory called Nudle – one of the game's missions sees you hijacking the Nudle Bus and carting all of its pretentious employees to work before you knuckle down to stealing stuff. Best of all, the game's primary antagonist is a bearded, top-knot-wearing idiot in a tracksuit who you bump into while he's night jogging along the water's edge, then catch him doing sun salutations in a room alone. (White)

Oscillating, not always convincingly, between dystopia and satire (Schulz; cf. Hennig, "*Watch*" 8), the game both fictionalizes real-world actors of relevant indus-

tries and appears to stand in conversation with other manifestations of similar themes circulating in popular culture around the same time.

In Dave Eggers's 2013 novel *The Circle*, for example, which reads a lot like the literary realization of Vaidhyanathan's worst nightmares, the eponymous company manages what is timely prevented by players in *WD2*: "completion," as it is called throughout the book, the complete making equal of all social and political life with the company's visions and technologies. A key component of this is what the Circle calls "transparency" but what really amounts to total surveillance, tracking and recording of every piece information out in the world. Half-way through the novel, readers are confronted with a triumvirate of slogans capturing the company's worldview, revealed during one of several in-house TED-talk-meets-tech-visionary-cult presentations: "SECRETS ARE LIES," "SHARING IS CARING," and "PRIVACY IS THEFT" (Eggers 305). While *Watch Dogs* offers the more optimistic vision – that Blume and its associates can still be stopped, if only barely – it certainly echoes the salience of such views in an always-online, all-connected world. During a side mission called "Rodentia Academy" in *WD2*, for instance, DedSec takes down a group that calls itself the Ordinate Academy. This group tricks innocent people into disclosing private data, planning to eventually making it public to promote the point that eliminating all secrets is the ultimate way to free oneself. Raymond 'T-Bone' Kenney, a major side character and ally in both videogames provides his view on the matter during said mission: "Yeah, that 'everybody's an open book' shit doesn't work so well when it's only a handful of people you expose. They should be targeting Silicon Valley with this." *Watch Dogs*' idea of transparency, then, seems more in line with Pasquale's that with the Circle's.

Another popular text with which *Watch Dogs* is in conversation is Sam Esmail's TV series *Mr. Robot*. The show, too, features an almighty multinational corporation, E Corp, which becomes the target of a group of hacktivists who call themselves fsociety. While the depiction of E Corp clearly draws on a dark vision of the likes of Google and other tech and data giants, fsociety seems loosely inspired by the much more dispersed, and not necessarily hacking-specific collective (for lack of a better word) of Anonymous, including a variation of the Guy Fawkes mask used for anonymity in video publications. DedSec, in turn, obviously draws on the same model; as Sam White's review of *WD2* describes the group, "think Anonymous but with sex appeal." Especially the first season of *Mr. Robot* at times ventures close to *WD*'s territory: visually, with its gloomy palette; narratively, with Elliot's hacker vigilantism early in the season; and stylistically, with its use of voice-over narration by the protagonist. By its second season, the show registers the presence of the game in their shared discourse, as one of the characters in the episode "eps2.8_h1dden-pr0cess.axx" is shown playing *WD* in a

store. Arguably, these texts are oftentimes consumed and made sense of alongside each other. One reviewer, for example, notes how *WD2* "merges Anonymous' somber tone with Mr. Robot's devil-may-care attitude" (Strickland).

While far from comprehensive, the previous pages provide a first glimpse into how, on a narrative level, the *Watch Dogs* videogames work as and aspire to be cautionary tales concerned with the impact of ever more intrusive communication technologies, growing monopolization in the industry behind these technologies, and their effect on society at large. Here the videogames resemble the kind of wake-up calls we find from scholarly work like Pasquale's and Vaidhyanathan's to entertainment products like *The Circle* and *Mr. Robot*, all of which, in one way or another represent aspects of the black box society. As the critique sketched out here happens mainly on the narrative level in *Watch Dogs*, the question of how the videogames' other meaning-bearing components feature in this discursive context remains. What about the ludic aspects, which scholars like Juul and Aarseth ("Genre") have identified as central to the meaning of videogames? What about action, both player action and machinic action, as Galloway urges us to consider? Specifically, what about the effects of *Watch Dogs*' ambioperative gameworlds? And what about questions of identity at play in the representations projected by the videogames, as Murray draws our attention to? The next two subchapters attend to several key game mechanics of the *Watch Dogs* videogames, especially focusing on profiling and online multiplayer functionality, and show how gameplay in conjunction with the gameworlds' ambient operations paints a different picture, ultimately complicating the previous reading of the games and producing a rather ambivalent politics.

## 3.2 Digital Profiling, Surveillance as Gameplay, and Crime Prediction

As indicated earlier, an engagement with ctOS is central to gameplay in both *Watch Dogs* titles. Players can, indeed have to, hack into ctOS via the so-called "profiler," an in-game smartphone application used by the protagonists which identifies objects in the gameworld that can be accessed and manipulated. Use of the profiler is necessary to solve the videogames' challenges since it allows players to identify targets for hacking, which are often at the center of *Watch Dogs*' scripted missions. A common mission structure, for example, is to acquire information held by a particular NPC in the gameworld, either to use it directly against them or to help some other cause. With the profiler activated, players navigating the gameworld are presented with personal data of every NPC in their vicinity; the person – or piece of infrastructure, since hacking targets vary throughout the

games – players are looking for is marked once profiled. Availability of and access to NPC profiles is justified by the games' fiction through ctOS' use of facial recognition technology; there appears to be a ctOS profile of every citizen in the world of *Watch Dogs*. Compared to the fact that, in the United States, more than half of adult Americans are already in facial recognition databases that are being actively used by law enforcement (Waddell). As there are surveillance cameras everywhere around *Watch Dogs*' gameworlds, everyone can be identified and their profiles accessed at any time. Aiden himself comments on this early on in *WD*: "I'll have to thank ctOS one day. A simple breach of their facial recognition software and I've got access to everyone's personal details." Following Bogost's lead, who emphasizes the importance of looking beyond the systemic nature of videogames and attending to videogames' "*unit operations*" (*Unit* 3), the act of profiling in *Watch Dogs* is crucial to the videogames' politics. As the main unit operation, profiling is a *sine qua non* for progress in *WD* and *WD2* since it is impossible to solve the singleplayer campaigns without using the profiler.

During play, the profiler works like this: the player's field of vision is overlaid with visual cues indicating possible connections, with pop-up windows containing personal information about any NPC appearing when the NPC is put in focus. In *WD2*, this is further accentuated by the so-called "nethack" view, which turns the world into a schematic, gray scale vision from which all hackable entities stand out. At the push of a button, players can then act on any of these contextual opportunities in various ways, depending on the object – for example, opening and closing doors, short-circuiting junction boxes, and, most importantly, entering security cameras.

There are several significant things at play here that need to be addressed, beginning with the personal profiles of NPCs. Although a more detailed profile is implied and referenced repeatedly – and even briefly displayed in Marcus's case early in *WD2* – players only see an abridged version. It consists of the character's name, age (only in *WD*), occupation, income, and a random but supposedly notable fact(oid) about them, such as recent online searches or sexual preferences. Occasionally, it is furthermore possible to intercept/acquire transcripts of instant messenger conversations or phone call audio snippets. Thus, NPCs are perceived by the player not as characters, let alone subjects, but as a abstract sets of information, which is typical for big data enterprises in various fields, as Cathy O'Neill remarks: "In . . . these industries, the real world, with all of its messiness, sits apart. The inclination is to replace people with data trails . . . . [T]he people affected remain every bit as abstract as the numbers dancing across the screen" (48). In the gameworld, we encounter, for example, people like "Olivia Arini, Political Science Major, frequent DUI acquittals" and "Ingrid Pagoyan, Prostitute, researching tech startups, income $58,900." These profiles are expressive of Pasquale's double metaphor

of the black box precisely because they suggest that anything could be recorded at the same time as it is impossible to uncover the processes that led to any of these profiles. The "runaway data" (Pasquale 21) presented in the profiles amounts to what Shoshana Zuboff calls "*behavioral surplus*" (75) and describes as the "[r]aw materials" (74) for surveillance capitalism's immensely profitable "*prediction products*" (96). The boundaries between private and public sector surveillance here are increasingly blurred (Pasquale 21, 42–48), and digital personal profiles are a decisive element of the surveillance-based technological and social transformations of our time. Interestingly, according to the developers, no two of these profiles in the game are the same (Sinha).

The NPC profiles constitute ambient operations as outlined in chapter 1. Besides a few mission-specific exceptions, profiling strangers is never really the player's core task, especially as the vast majority of NPCs are irrelevant to the player's progress in either the main campaign or optional side missions. Yet whatever else it is that players are currently doing, as long as the profiler (or "nethack" in *WD2*) is activated – which it likely is most of the time – the citizen profiles automatically surround the player. They are thus constantly confronted with the seemingly random, personal information of absolute strangers. The profiles are never central yet always present, pushing this crucial aspect of *Watch Dogs*'s world – and the black box society of the real world – into the player's attention. This becomes significant because these profiles not only constantly capture and redirect players' attention but also prompt emergent ways of playing the videogames based on these profiles, one example of which I come back to in a moment.

In their depiction of cities surveilled via an operating system created and controlled by a seemingly almighty corporation, the *Watch Dogs* videogames conflate surveillance activities by state and corporate actors of the real world, though, arguably, these cannot really be separated in the first place, considering how "commercial and government 'dataveillance' results in synergistic swapping of intimate details about individual lives" (Pasquale 21, cf. 42–48). The games thus equally address the erosion of privacy through surveillance by intelligence agencies and through extensive digital profiling by private "surveillance capitalists" (Zuboff 8). Going beyond merely depicting surveillance and profiling, the games force players to engage with their processes (Whitson and Simon 314, 316).

A central gameplay feature of *Watch Dogs* are the surveillance cameras permeating the gameworlds. To succeed in the videogames, the player constantly accesses these cameras, which means becoming one with them; in these moments, the movement and gaze of camera and player are one and the same. The cameras allow the player to gain insights into places where their avatar is not actually present, and her gaze can move from one camera into another in its vicinity at

will; in the world of *Watch Dogs*, there truly is "no place to hide" (Greenwald 201). The player's gaze hovers above street corners, cruises along with NPCs bearing body cameras, floats through the air in a drone (in *WD2*), and emanates from webcams integrated in computers, all of which become the proverbial one-way mirrors of the surveillance state and the black box society (cf. Greenwald 169; Pasquale 9).

Concerning the general issue of surveillance, *WD* became part of the popular discourse that followed Edward Snowden's revelations about the NSA's surveillance programs immediately after the videogame's release. Reviewers and producers alike played their part in this. Consider, for example, Mark Yarm's piece in the *Rolling Stone*, the subtitle of which reads "How the Year's Hottest New Video Game Anticipated a Post-Snowden World." Yarm begins by describing how, when the game was first announced and presented to the public, it seemed like a somewhat exaggerated speculative fiction, before he continues:

> But then Edward Snowden went public, and news reports revealed the extent of real-world Chicago's predictive-policing program (which sounded an awful lot like *Watch Dogs*' centralized Crime Detection system), and the highly anticipated game – finally out now – didn't seem so far-out. "Throughout the development, there were things we felt were a bit too sci-fi," says Thomas Geffroyd, brand content director of developer Ubisoft Montreal. "Then three months later, they were in the news." (Yarm 24)

Sean Hollister's preview for the *Verge* strikes a similar chord:

> Ubisoft announced the game nearly a year ago, when its ideas seemed plausible but perhaps slightly far-fetched. But in light of PRISM, the US government's alleged internet surveillance program, Ubisoft developers are starting to look practically prescient. "It's like reality is catching up to the game," *Watch Dogs* lead game designer Danny Belanger tells *The Verge*.

These are just two examples of how some people immediately placed *WD* in a post-Snowden discourse on surveillance in the United States and beyond, explicitly highlighting the similarities between the gameworld and real-world practices.

The interesting thing here, the specificity of the functioning of surveillance in *Watch Dogs*, is how the different layers of the videogame work together. The commonly employed webcam hack, for instance, generally is the same thing one can see in a TV series like *Mr. Robot*, where, in the episode "eps1.1_ones-and-zer0es.mpeg," Dark Army hacker Cisco accesses another character's webcam by way of a malware disguised as a mixtape CD. As viewers see the victim's room on Cisco's screen from the point of view of the webcam, this looks very similar to the same action as presented in *Watch Dogs*. What is a depiction of surveillance in *Mr. Robot*, however, is an act of surveillance in *Watch Dogs*; whereas the TV viewer observes the watching, the videogame player *commits* it. In both *WD* and *WD2*, there is even a series of side missions called "Privacy Invasions," which literally

amount to invading NPCs' personal spaces and spying on them, confronting the player with NPCs having sex, playing Russian roulette with a prostitute, discussing diseases and financial hardships, committing suicide, and more (cf. Fennimore 56). As Jennifer R. Whitson and Bart Simon formulate it, "what matters here is that *Watch Dogs* can be understood somewhat differently because it is a surveillance game, not just a game about surveillance" (314). Yet from a ludological perspective, the surveillance in *Watch Dogs* stands out not because of its action but precisely because of its representation. As Whitson and Simon themselves note, referring to the example of chess, surveillance is a key principle of all games: "Each player surveys the field of play in as much minute detail as they can with the goal of using that information to affect the course of play in their favor" (309). The same is key to *Watch Dogs*; constantly outnumbered and overpowered, players need to know as much as possible about the spatial layout, locations and types of antagonists they are up against, and hacking opportunities available in order to solve the videogames' challenges. The difference between chess and *Watch Dogs*, in this respect, is that the former requires surveillance while being about something else – a royal battle for spatial domination – while the latter works through surveillance as it depicts it, by way of "procedural representation" (Bogost, *Persuasive* 9). Whereas chess features play as surveillance, *Watch Dogs* renders surveillance as (game)play. In this sense, then, *Watch Dogs* is about exactly what it says it is about.

Coming back to the issue of profiling, players inadvertently scan countless profiles of unsuspecting NPCs throughout the course of *WD* and *WD2*. For those characters, privacy in the gameworld is nonexistent. Not every character holds valuable information and, therefore, the player does not have to profile everyone. Nonetheless, due to the ambioperative gameworld, this profiling constantly happens, in what could be described as collateral action, even when the player is actually pursuing something else. This, in turn, is typical of the ways in which state surveillance in the real world, while allegedly being directed at particular targets, especially terrorists and other criminals, routinely records and profiles unsuspicious and unsuspecting individuals along the way, accumulating massive databases of personal profiles across the board (Rosen 20–27).

Interestingly, most of the hackers in the videogames, especially the playable characters, are exempted from this kind of profiling since they deleted their own profiles from the ctOS database; when the surveillance cameras put one of these characters in focus, facial recognition fails, as there is no match in the database. Coupled with the predominately stealth-based gameplay – for many missions, it is either necessary or advisable to remain undetected – one could argue that player activity largely takes place in secrecy in relation to the other inhabitants of the gameworld. NPCs have no way of knowing when they are being profiled and sur-

veilled, and even hostile characters, who are more alert, usually only notice when the player makes a mistake and gives away their presence. This resembles "the logic of secrecy" central to the black box society (Pasquale 2). The fact that profiling as gamic action only goes in one direction in *Watch Dogs* – perfectly aligned with a "contemporary world [which] more closely resembles a one-way mirror" (Pasquale 9) – has implications for its politics, as I elaborate in the conclusion of this chapter.

Returning to the profiles themselves, they closely resemble, albeit in a simplified manner, the digital customer/citizen profiles that have become so important in the twenty-first century (Pasquale 1–6). Through the mere possibility of accessing anyone's information, players are confronted with the omnipresent availability of personal data at the same time as these profiles truly are black box profiles since players have no way of assessing how the information was assembled. Players are constantly compelled to make choices about whom to profile and which information to exploit, which often leads to emergent ways of playing the game based on these profiles. Again, this is an effect of the ambioperative gameworlds of the *Watch Dogs* videogames, whose ambient operations repeatedly capture and redirect the player's attention and action, as the game "turns casual inattentiveness into focused watchfulness in which every encounter becomes a matter of concern" (Whitson and Simon 315). As Aiden phrases it early on in *WD*: "Lucky for me, this city's full of distractions, and they can't hide from me."

The most infamous example of this kind of profile-based gameplay is a short montage that was uploaded to YouTube soon after *WD*'s release. The clip with the title "Making the World a Better Place" features, to quote Whitson and Simon, "a *Watch Dogs* player using the profiler to selectively kill AI characters with different racial, ethnic, religious markers" (Whitson and Simon 314). As Whitson and Simon write, this video

> prompted widespread concern about the developers' decision to facilitate this kind of profiling in their game, although there are some who argued that the video was meant more as black humor since a Canadian, fan fiction writer and avid video game player are also targeted. Developers also tactfully turned the critique around by pointing out that the game calls attention to the possible horrors of profiling technologies with the youtube video being a case in point. (314–15)

Regardless of the video's intentions, what this incident exemplifies is that players mediate between the mechanics of the gameworld and the logics of the society they are a part of in appropriating "the *space of possibility*" the game affords (Salen and Zimmerman 67), which in an open-world videogame like *WD* leaves ample room for play.

There is more to it, however. Regarding the character profiles accessible to players, most of the time they are arguably closer to raw data than to processed

inferences. One NPC profile, for instance, reads "subscribed to BDSM website"; this is raw information rather than a prediction based on said data, as something like "likely to buy a whip and handcuffs" would be. In this way, the NPC profiles exemplify the recording of individual pieces of data in all areas of life, with one particular set of these being represented in each profile in the games. While "[p]attern recognition is the name of the game" in the black box society (Pasquale 20), such a mechanism is absent from the world of *Watch Dogs* besides its mention in specific scripted narrative sequences, such as the example of the health insurance company mentioned earlier. The gameworld itself, then, is one representative of data collection rather than profiling.

This only changes, however, once the player gets involved. Players process the data presented to make decisions based on it, just like the player in "Making the World a Better Place," which then leads to "new courses of action that have not been otherwise defined in the rules of the game" (Whitson and Simon 315). Whereas the algorithms of real-world profiling are located in the computer, those of *Watch Dogs* are situated in the player. A small sample of information determines whether players deem an NPC worthy of being hacked, of being robbed, or even of being killed; this is how characters are profiled in *Watch Dogs*, by the player not the game. At first glance, any bias in profile-based action in the videogames would accordingly be the player's bias. The kind of information gathered and displayed to the player, however, are a selection based in certain kinds of assumptions, meaning that the information available is already biased in particular ways itself. While, according to Whitson and Simon, no account of how the profiler works is publicly available, in terms of which possible configurations developers chose to embed in it,

> there are implicit values and politics associated with the database list of deviant "personality" features that players may choose to act on. Many of the categories are "common sense" or even comedic notions of deviance and otherness presumably from the perspective of the white heterosexual male that is the protagonist of the story.
>
> What we get with this intriguing system for making decisions in the gameworld is not a celebration of difference or plurality but a mechanism for defining deviance and otherness against some undefined norm. What is also clear is that there is a finite set of "otherness" categories (mostly likely limited by both technical constraints and developers' imaginations) which must be assigned to all characters in the game (except of the player). (Whitson and Simon 315)

Both player bias and system bias at work in the profiler display the same problems inherent to the algorithms of the black box society, which have certain "values . . . embedded into their software" (Pasquale 38; cf. O'Neill 24–27).

In one of my play sessions in *WD*, for example, I encountered an NPC whose profile told me that this person "frequents racist blogs." The first remarkable

thing about this is that someone, during the development of the game, has determined that this is a noteworthy information, that it should be included as a possible profile in the first place, a decision based on some kind of assumption, whatever it might have been. When the player encounters such an information, it is in and of itself a neutral one, since no context is available; for example, one neither learns how many visits to such websites are necessary in which time span to be considered frequent nor why this character accesses such blogs. Yet the player's reaction – in a sense, their algorithm – is likely not neutral but complements the information presented by the videogame with other assumptions of their own. In this instance, the player does not know whether the NPC is a racist or whether she informs herself about racist thinking because she wants to fight it, but the player draws a conclusion based on one simple piece of information, nonetheless. Depending on the player's dispositions, this conclusion, in turn, influences whether they ignore or act on this NPC, and in which way. D. Fox Harrell ascribes such behavior to the influence of "*phantasms*," which he describes as "*a combination of imagery (mental or sensory) and ideas*" (4). He explains: "Much of human thought depends on these phantasms: to the extent that people ever imaginatively extrapolate to fill in gaps in our first-hand experiences, we are building phantasms" (Harrell 5). The ideas combined with an image in a phantasm are "ideas based in particular worldviews. That is, phantasms imbue images with connotative meanings based in some worldview beyond that which is apprehended perceptually" (Harrell 6). In the example above, the image of a person depicted as frequenting racist blogs combined with the idea that racists are active on such blogs could form the phantasm 'this NPC is a racist.' In the *Watch Dogs* videogames, such phantasms frequently guide player action.

Consider, once again, Eggers's *The Circle*, in which protagonist Mae Holland involuntarily becomes the guinea pig for her company's presentation of a service designed to facilitate better dating matches through detailed personal profiles composed through an algorithmic analysis of personal information openly available online. Later the same day, she still feels uneasy about it:

> So what had so mortified her during Gus's presentation? She couldn't put her finger on it. Was it only the surprise of it? Was it the pinpoint accuracy of the algorithms? Maybe. But then again, it wasn't entirely accurate, so was *that* the problem? Having a matrix of preferences presented as your essence, the whole you? Maybe that was it. It was some kind of mirror, but it was incomplete, distorted. (Eggers 126)

The character profiles in *Watch Dogs* work exactly this way, a small set of disparate information combines to form the essence of any NPC in the game, which then merges with the player's own ideas to form certain phantasms that impact gameplay.

Using NPC profiles to make gameplay decisions seems to be a common way of playing the *Watch Dogs* videogames; one can find countless examples besides "Making the World a Better Place" on online discussion boards. Consider, for instance, the following post by *reddit* user Not_a_Templar, titled "The Profiler Makes the Game all Better": "Profiling my enemies while in a mission really makes me think whether or not I want to kill. I found one man who was planning his one year old's first birthday, and I just knew I couldn't kill him. But there was another man who was a sex offender, so I had to kill him. I just absolutely love how this game makes me think morally." For such players, the profiler adds a moral dimension to in-game action. Others go further in questioning the mechanics and ethics at play here, like a user called GameStunts:

> Why am I indiscriminately robbing these people? Why is my ONLY option to "hack" (rob) these people? And why doesn't that affect my reputation? More over, why can't I kick them a few thousand dollars to help with their trouble? Right now I have over $3,000,000 in game, and have no use for it. I can't even give the pan handler on the street a few dollars. The profiler exists as nothing more than window dressing at the moment, and I would love to see them expand on it by rewarding players for reading the information, deciding if it's right to take money from these people, perhaps affect their reputation for not taking money from "Single Mother raising 4 children" or "War veterain [sic] suffering from PTSD."

Such comments underline how profiling is not only carried out but often also reflected upon on the player's side, to the point of suggesting more variable uses to support varying ways of playing *Watch Dogs*.

The last thing to be addressed in this section are the "Crime Detection Events" in *WD*. As Aiden is not only a hacker but also a vigilante, he also acts on crime and misbehavior in the gameworld. In these kinds of world-induced events, the player occasionally gets alerted about an impending crime about to happen in their vicinity. The crime has been predicted by ctOS before it actually occurs. If the player chooses to act on it, they have to find the potential victim of the crime by scanning the profiles of surrounding NPCs. Once the victim-to-be is found, the player has to remain unseen in order to not scare off the perpetrator. A continuously filling percentage bar indicates the growing impendence of the crime. Once absolutely imminent, when the perpetrator approaches the victim, players have to prevent the crime and neutralize the perpetrator. The outcome of the event affects Aiden's public reputation and, thus, the way civilians react to him and his actions when they see him (for example, whether or not they call the police on him). The reputation feature, which is common in many open-world role-playing videogames, at first glance seems to perfectly embody the profiling processes central to the black box society: any player action witnessed by NPCs is registered by the system and transformed into a profile, which is represented by both a rank (for example, "Vigilante") and by NPCs' reactions toward Aiden. While such a

mechanism is common in other games too, it resonates in a distinct way with the thematic focus of *Watch Dogs* and its world of ubiquitous surveillance and extensive digital profiling. In fact, *WD*'s reputation element is remarkable precisely because it is not a black box. This, for once, is a kind of profiling that is absolutely transparent: it is at all times clear when a particular action changes the player's reputation and in which way it does so, which means that it can always be inferred which actions are reputation-relevant and what the repercussion of each action for the player's reputation is.

The crime detection feature in *Watch Dogs* is reminiscent of several fictional forebears. A more recent one of these is Jonathan Nolan's TV series *Person of Interest*, which revolves around a crime-prediction machine developed by a genius programmer, which he secretly uses to act on crimes deemed irrelevant by the government actors for whom he built the system. As one *Watch Dogs* player summarizes:

> It's crazy how many similarities there are to WD.
> – Computer system that can predict crime
> – Cell phone used to hack communications
> – Ability to profile anyone on the street
> – Badass who uses that information to intervene
> – Super hacker able to mess with ATMs and cameras anywhere
> – Scene where someone uses a camera to direct an ally around enemies (paralog)

*Person of Interest*, then, is yet another one of those popular cultural texts circulating in the same discourse as *Watch Dogs*, in which audience members often consume one alongside the other and make sense of them in relation to each other. Interestingly, however, most reviewers connect the crime prediction missions, and *WD* in general, to an older template, Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report*, itself an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's short story of the same name.

With regard to crime prediction in *WD*, a number of aspects are worthy of discussion here, beginning with real-world crime-prediction systems, which are the most relevant reference points in the context of playing American and *Watch Dogs*' cultural work. Predictive policing is a reality of twenty-first-century law enforcement in the United States and already applied in cities like Chicago, where *WD* is set, and Los Angeles. "This is the future," Andrew Guthrie Ferguson writes in his book *The Rise of Big Data Policing: Surveillance, Race, and the Future of Law Enforcement*, "[t]his is the present. This is the beginning of big data policing" (2). With the help of big data analytics and machine-learning algorithms "[p]olice can identify the street corner most likely to see the next car theft or the people most likely to be shot" (Ferguson 3). The two examples mentioned by Ferguson embody the two main approaches found in current predictive policing technologies: place-based policing and person-based policing. The former refers to the predic-

tion of hot spots where crime is likely to occur at a specific time, while the latter concerns the identification of individuals who, due to their personal networks and behavior, will probably be involved in criminal activity. Both approaches rely on large amounts of historical crime data that is automatically transformed into forecasts through analysis, interpretation, and extrapolation by machine-learning algorithms.

O'Neil recounts the example of the small city of Reading, PA, which struggled with poverty and crime during the recession after the 2008 financial crisis and yet had to deal with severe cuts in its police force:

> Reading police chief William Heim had to figure out how to get the same or better policing out of a smaller force. So in 2013 he invested in crime prediction software made by PredPol, a Big Data start-up based in Santa Cruz, California. The program processed historical crime data and calculated, hour by hour, where crimes were most likely to occur. The Reading policemen could view the program's conclusions as a series of squares, each one just the size of two football fields. If they spent more time patrolling these squares, there was a good chance they would discourage crime. And sure enough, a year later, Chief Heim announced that burglaries were down by 23 percent. (84–85)

Similar programs, developed by both start-ups and established players like Oracle (Rosen 111), are now being deployed "in budget-strapped police departments across the country" (O'Neil 85). As *WD* is set in Chicago, it clearly alludes to the Windy City's predictive policing system, especially the person-based Strategic Subject List, which is a prediction of which people are likely to become involved in gun violence in the near future either as victim or perpetrator, based on their personal networks (Ferguson 34–40). While the exact workings of the algorithm are yet another black box, it generally "assigns scores based on arrests, shootings, affiliations with gang members and other variables," and, consequently, "the list aims to predict who is most likely to be shot soon or to shoot someone" (Davey). The Strategic Subject List has repeatedly come under fire for its ineffectiveness and possibly adverse effects (Stroud; Asher and Arthur), even as the Chicago Police Department heralds it as a successful and important factor in reducing violent crime (Mclaughlin).

As it targets particular individuals, the crime prediction system in *WD* is thus more reminiscent of the Strategic Subject List than of place-based systems like PredPol (which are being deployed in Chicago as well), even as it is focused exclusively on one-on-one assault. Like its real-world counterpart, the conditions and mechanisms behind any alert remain inaccessible; players never really learn why a particular victim and perpetrator are now likely to get into a violent altercation, besides a short suggestive snippet of a messaging or phone conversation.

Two things are significant here. First, if a player chooses to act on one of the crime alerts, they must engage in exactly the kind of profiling described in the

previous pages. As their main objective is now to find the potential victim, the player needs to use the profiler to scan the NPCs in their vicinity in order to find the right person, thus inadvertently acquiring private information about citizens entirely unrelated to the crime, which uncannily echoes practices of unrestrained data mining in the name of fighting crime and terrorism in the United States (cf. Rosen 96–107), with the difference that, in *WD*, the player can actually find the correct target each time.

The latter brings us to the second remarkable aspect of the functioning of the crime prediction system in the game. If the player does not follow up on an alert, they have no way of knowing whether the predicted crime ever took place. "Such is the nature of prediction: It could be the future," writes Ferguson, "Or not" (64). If players do act, however, the alert always proves correct; there do not seem to be any false positives in ctOS' crime prediction, at least none the player ever gets to see. Adding the fact that the player can fail this type of side mission by either blowing their cover and thus scaring off the future perpetrator or failing to intervene before the crime has been carried out (when the progress bar reaches 100 percent) (cf. Ng and MacDonald 182), the message of this aspect of *WD* seems clear: humans make mistakes while computers are infallible, which is one figuration of the kind of misconception critics like Golumbia push against. Consequently, while the narrative layer in the *Watch Dogs* series calls attention to the flaws and dangers of any uncritical reliance on data mining and predictive algorithms, the videogames' procedural rhetoric reinforces the very notion that intelligent software is less prone to, or even free of, errors like those caused by humans. On the other hand, the process of the Crime Detection Events inadvertently exposes crime prediction systems as tools for policing rather than crime prevention. There is actually no way to reduce crime in the gameworld. The player does not prevent crime so much as they stop crimes-in-process, which is a different thing altogether, especially as the player is actually punished when they are detected by the perpetrator ahead of the act, which effectively prevents the crime from happening, at least in this particular moment.

Interestingly, Crime Detection Events do not appear in *WD2*; the topic of computational methods in the fight against crime, however, is implemented in the sequel's gameplay in a different way. In a feature inspired by role-playing games, both *Watch Dogs* titles reward the completion of missions with experience points, which can then be invested in certain skills the player character can attain to make him better equipped to solve further challenges. In both videogames, these are organized in a so-called skill tree featuring different branches such as "Social Engineering," "City Disrupts," "Vehicle Hacking," and others. One of the hacking skills that can be learned throughout *WD2* allows the player to place a false APB (all-points bulletin) on any NPC in the gameworld. At its basic level, this

tells police that a suspect has been located and they will come to try to arrest the NPC, while the advanced version turns the NPC into a confirmed criminal wanted for a serious crime. Both actions are represented in the videogame as an alteration of the NPC's citizen profile; from one moment to the next, they are listed in the system as, for example, a "cop killer." While such an operation indicates, quite lucidly, the adverse effects any erroneous profile in the black box society can have, the way it plays out in *WD2* falls short of anything that could be called a successful critique, as I elaborate in the concluding section of this chapter.

## 3.3 Online Intrusions and Impromptu Networks

Some of *Watch Dogs*' seamless multiplayer modes, which are integrated into the singleplayer experience, in the series conspicuously reproduce some of the dynamics of present-day surveillance practices in gameplay, even blurring the boundaries between the fictional and real layers of videogame play. Two options in *WD* are of particular concern here, "Online Hacking" (returning as "Hacking Invasion" in *WD2*) and "Online Tailing." In both modes, the player, by using their player character's phone, can connect online to another player who is currently playing in singleplayer mode but who is not on a dedicated mission at this moment, and enter that player's session. The goal is then to find the other player and, depending on the mode, to either hack the other player's avatar by installing a backdoor virus on his phone, or to simply follow and profile them. Either way, players always see their own avatar as Aiden – or, in *WD2*, as Marcus – while the other player's character looks like any other civilian in the gameworld. As players infiltrate another player's game via the internet, this involves a fleeting moment of unnoticeable intrusion since the invaded player is only notified after either five minutes have passed – this is the time allotted to finding the other player in their session – or when the task of the invasion has started. Once alarmed, the invaded player has to find the intruder and neutralize them by any means possible.

Several aspects are noteworthy here. To begin with, whereas the surveillance in the singleplayer mode discussed before is one directed exclusively at NPCs – that is, at fictional, computer-generated and computer-controlled individuals – multiplayer gameplay is where *Watch Dogs* truly becomes "a surveillance game" (Whitson and Simon 314). The defining unit operation here is the surveillance of another human agent, represented by their avatar, in the gameworld; the essence of gameplay here, moreover, is literally to see without being seen. This is especially interesting with regard to that ephemeral moment when the invading player is present in the other player's session without the latter knowing it; for a brief period of time, an imbalance in knowledge informs gameplay, as one player

knows more than the other. Players sometimes self-awarely use the mode's rules exactly to simply surveil another player; one *reddit* user called L33TPWNERS, for example, exuberantly describes his gameplay experiences under a thread he titles "TIL You Don't Actually HAVE to Hack Anyone in the Hacking Invasion. You Can People Watch." From a ludological perspective, one could even argue that, for this short moment, there is no game anymore since not all the players involved are aware of the game, know its rules, and have agreed to participate (cf. Huizinga 8–13; Caillois 3–10; Suits 43). In this instance, gameplay approaches the concept of dark play, which "is an exploration of the wild side of play in which players decide to engage in an activity . . . to force an emotional response in those who do not recognize they are actually playing" (Sicart, *Play* 15). This state immediately dissolves once the invaded player is alerted, and all balance in knowledge of the game that is played is restored; the magic circle, as it were, reappears. From the point of view of the victim, being hacked or tailed features as an ambient operation of the gameworld: the whole premise of these modes is that the invaded player is unsuspecting, caught up in some other activity, whatever it may be, until the alert catches their attention. What is significant here is that the realization that one is being invaded, the feeling of being hacked, is created not through momentary core gameplay but through an operation happening simultaneously in the surrounding, in the ambioperative gameworld – which then captures and redirects the player's attention, leading to a new course of gameplay. Reviewers frequently applaud the affective engagement the mode provides since "[i]t's tense" (B. Caldwell) and "never less than exciting" (Smith).

Invading another player's session here is expressive of the changing notion of privacy in what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun calls "the age of fiber optics" (26), which at this point has largely been "displaced by wireless technologies (which also preceded it)" (27). In her book *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*, Chun takes apart the contradictions between an imaginary that views the internet as the ultimate embodiment of and tool for freedom and the technological reality that the internet fundamentally relies on perfect control in order to function, thus providing a new account of the relation between control and freedom and ultimately sketching out the democratizing potential inherent in this relation. Discussing issues ranging from the technological implications of the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP), the backbone of the internet as we know it, to webcam internet pages, she traces, among other things, what she describes as "the move from private/public to open/closed" (284) in an age defined by online communications.

*Watch Dogs* makes visible the logic outlined by Chun in both its representational layer and its mechanics. The intrusion depicted in the diegesis is expressed via the process of one player entering another player's game, which before and

after this event is decidedly a singleplayer experience, one which is, nonetheless, always open to connections from outside as long as the system is online, which it is by default. Unless one turns off the online play option entirely – closing access, as it were, in Chun's terms – any notion of gaming privacy often implied when a player chooses to play the singleplayer campaign of a videogame is suspended in the *Watch Dogs* franchise. In the twenty-first century, using any kind of online application, including videogames, means opening access to data, which is one of the fundamental enabling conditions of the black box society; privacy is no longer the default option. In *Watch Dogs*, the real-world layer of the game procedurally involves players in this logic. A process of intrusion is enacted and interacted with, a process that represents similar real-world operations central to concerns about online privacy, like the fear of being hacked and not knowing it, which, in turn, is connected to all sorts of anxieties about cybercrime.

Beyond the videogames, the gaming devices in question here are themselves implicated in such processes. Both the latest generations of gaming consoles as well as gaming PCs are usually connected to the internet, regardless of whether a player even plays online or not; in being online, they necessarily continuously communicate with other nodes in the network that is the internet (Chun 3–4). More than that, these gaming machines (and their accompanying platforms and databases) themselves function as exactly the kinds of recording devices invoked in Pasquale's black box metaphor. From the coarse collection of metadata to the required personalized accounts (often including credit card details, if online purchases are made), to game recommendations based on players' purchases within the system – for example, Steam's "recommended because you played games tagged with" suggestions – the black box machinery is at work everywhere in the realm of videogames. While players may enjoy the recommendation algorithms, which are now omnipresent in electronic entertainment from Spotify to Netflix, in what may have become the new default paradigm for discovering new art/contents, the massive databases emerging from these systems have become high-value targets for cybercriminals, too. The latter was shown most infamously in 2011, when hackers infiltrated Sony's Playstation Network, one of the world's largest online gaming platforms, and acquired sensible data of 77 million users ("Sony").

Returning to the subject of surveillance, Tom van Nuenen speaks of a "procedural gaze" (519), referring to the game system which determines who gets watched by whom, as he discusses the role-playing game *Dark Souls*, which features a similar mode. Drawing on both Michel Foucault and Gary T. Marx (whom he quotes here), he writes:

> Playing the game, I am afraid of the invasion by other players, not of the abstract regulating system – but these other players do not decide who gets to face whom. In *Dark Souls*, the

> gaze itself can be attributed to an abstracted procedural system. The watchtower guards have been replaced by a "procedural gaze" that exerts control by attributing and linking players/prisoners in the system, which is characteristic to new forms of surveillance that is "wholly or partly automated." (519)

Something similar holds true for the *Watch Dogs* games. One does not get invaded on a constant basis; it is even possible, theoretically, that one never falls victim to in-game hacking at all. It is, however, at all times possible to be hacked as long as online play is enabled and, thus, open. This noticeably affects the gameplay experience and how players make sense of it. The game mechanic produces player reactions like this one from a *reddit* thread with the title "Invasions Are Making Me Paranoid" by the user AlphaEnder: "I often tail cars that I think are acting suspicious until I can profile them. Anyone running away from anything is a suspect, and may be shot if I think they're running too fast without reason. I often stop my car and hide after going around a corner, hoping the invader behind me will fly around the corner trying to hack me." Another user, called ClownAlley, seconds the effectiveness of the game in producing a feeling of paranoia in his response: "The game succeeds on this point to a huge degree! They really nailed what they were going for as far as paranoia levels are concerned. I'm ALWAYS checking out everything around me for fear of being invaded at any moment." As Whitson and Simon point out, "[t]he interesting analytical issue here is not whether similar agents of surveillance lurk in the shadows of the real world but rather how surveillance technologies propose new modalities of attention and watchfulness in our everyday lives" (316).

Van Nuenen argues that the reciprocity of such gameplay elements marks them as not simply subjectifying but also empowering for players, more in line with an age of post-panopticism than the classic Foucauldian notion of panopticism (cf. Foucault 195–228). He writes:

> Lyon . . . has argued that, especially in the post-Panopticon, "surveillance is seldom a personal hailing, a face-to-face matter, a one-off event [but something] continuous, general, routine, systematic, impersonal, and ubiquitous.'" This rings true in online social environments such as Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest, where people can simultaneously exhibit themselves and invisibly gaze at each other – while the companies providing the service are capable of invisibly scrutinizing the behavioral patterns of their users. Meanwhile, the countless security cameras people are confronted with in daily life represent a total one-wayness of the gaze . . . . *Dark Souls*, in contrast, offers a dynamics of reciprocal one-to-one visibility. (523–524)

One can see the fundamental difference between singleplayer and multiplayer gameplay in *Watch Dogs* here. Whereas surveillance during singleplayer gameplay works as the quasi-panoptic – *quasi* because no disciplining occurs – one-way mirror through which the player watches the gameworld's NPCs, embodied

by the image of the surveillance camera, the multiplayer experience is closer to the post-panoptic logic of the many watching the many. The latter, however, temporally separates the unit operations of watching and being watched; while everybody can theoretically watch anybody, the player is either subject *or* agent of surveillance, watches or is watched, never both at the same time. While this kind of multiplayer mode itself is employed by several videogames, it takes on a distinct meaning in *Watch Dogs* as it resonates with the series' overall surveillance theme.

Interestingly, *WD2* introduced a change to this multiplayer mode that relates more to real-world concerns outside the game than to its diegetic world: in the console versions, everybody can get hacked, but only those players who have a paid subscription to the PlayStation Plus service or the Xbox Gold membership, depending on which gaming console is used, can invade others. This not only reflects a widespread recent trend toward so-called pay-to-play elements in videogames, where players pay extra for either additional content or for unlocking the full range of gameplay options that come with a given title. It is also symptomatic of the power differentials underlying the network society, where an open connection does not necessarily imply equal access, as access is tied to resources – financial, technological, and informational. In the black box society, access to data is a one-way street – and so is, consequently, the stream of data – determined by the mighty, whether these are private corporations or federal agencies. Analogously, players who want to have access to another player's session in *WD2* have to pay for this access.

Another aspect of the *Watch Dogs* franchise is relevant here: the videogames' network aesthetics. As Jagoda asserts, "[i]n an early twenty-first century world saturated increasingly by always-on computing, pervasive social media, and persistent virtual worlds, connection is less an imperative than it is the infrastructural basis of everyday life" (1). As indicated before, our perception and understanding of this kind of network society (to stick with Castells's term), which is also the basis for the black box society, is fundamentally informed by what Jagoda calls "a network imaginary" (3). In this context, the *Watch Dogs* videogames can be seen as agents of this network imaginary since they "enable . . . players to think about networks not merely by knowing or representing them but by *feeling and inhabiting* them . . . " (28).

There is a perceivable difference between the singleplayer and multiplayer elements of the videogames in how they engage the problem of the network. Interestingly, while one of the things that sets videogames apart from classic, predigital games is that so many of them require only one player, if you do not count the machine (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 151), this is seen by some as an "'historical aberration' wrought by unconnected computers" (Bogost, "Can" 64; cf. Jagoda 144). Singleplayer gameplay in *Watch Dogs* is marked by what Jagoda describes as "a representational relationship to networks," which has been a com-

mon feature of videogames even before the era of online play (147). His account of the 2001 hacking simulation game *Uplink* illustrates how predictable and formulaic the *Watch Dogs* videogames remain on the representational level, as its description comes remarkably close to Ubisoft's hacker franchise:

> The missions require the player to delete compromising information, steal data from one corporation for another, test security protocols, acquire government agent lists, and more. Rather than striving for realism, the game follows conventions . . . of 1980s and 1990s Hollywood films such as *War Games* (1983), *Sneakers* (1992), *Hackers* (1995), and *The Net* (1995). (149)

On a narrative level, the *Watch Dogs* videogames reproduce and update the same tropes as their forbears. Likewise, in their gameplay, they once more forego any realistic approximation of hacking – whatever that might look like – and instead render it in the form of spatial puzzles (with an occasional temporal challenge), though their focus on flows of data arguably replicates in principle the logics of the computer networks represented here.

The profiler, particularly in its more pronounced "nethack" perspective in *WD2*, serves as a visual interface to the networks of the gameworld (cf. Jagoda 149). With nethack view activated, the gameworld turns into a field of possible connections to NPCs, surveillance cameras, infrastructure, etc. While these connections represent a kind of network the player engages with, however, there really is no network here. As Jagoda writes, "[a]lthough there are several types of networks, the primary characteristics shared by these structures are openness, flexibility, extensibility, complexity, internal asymmetry, and an interdependence of individual parts" (8). The world of *Watch Dogs*, in contrast, is a closed and somewhat static system, in which (almost) none of the parts are functionally interdependent and whose asymmetry only lies in the fact that the player is the only node that can link to any other, which defies the notion of a network and makes the videogames look more like a succession of independent one-to-one connections between the player and objects in the gameworld. In this way, *Watch Dogs*' singleplayer gameplay offers players a visual as well as narrative experience of engaging with networks without actually implicating them in one, "approaching it as an infrastructure" and falling back to "the antiseptic link-node structures through which networks are so often conveyed . . . " (Jagoda 155, 168).

Taking into account the multiplayer component, particularly of *WD2*, on the other hand, a different picture emerges. Due to the seamless integration of multiplayer elements into the singleplayer experience, players are repeatedly confronted with other human agents in their iteration of the gameworld. These are introduced to the player as members of DedSec, who can join them for non-campaign missions. The way in which this kind of "seamless coop" gameplay works and is presented to the player constitutes a procedural network aesthetics

that is much more effective in producing that sense of "*feeling and inhabiting*" networks that Jagoda's work is invested in. First, in contrast to the purely fictional network represented through the profiler app, the presence of other players in one's own gameworld visualizes the real network of gaming devices connected around the globe. The appearance of another player's avatar in one's session really demonstrates the existence of such a network, which would otherwise be unperceivable. This network can, in fact, only be known, indeed only be active, if its openness is confirmed through the representation (and action) of one player within another player's session. Second, the network is expressed here, too, via the representational level. In the spontaneous ad hoc connections between several players, we find a procedural representation, in Bogost's terms, of the network *as* a network, which is different from the kind of static representation conveyed through the profiler. These player networks are open (at least to a certain degree), emergent, asymmetrical, and flexible, and they work through both the representational and the mechanical layer of the game. Jagoda maintains that "interconnected operability, online access, and a live status are not merely possible states but the necessary and defining conditions of any network. Indeed, one of the difficulties of ever naming, let alone thinking through, networks is that they are inherently emergent . . ." (8). Since they embody these characteristics, the network aesthetics of *WD2*'s seamless multiplayer gameplay effectively contributes to a network imaginary that makes palpable the network society surrounding us in the twenty-first century.

Before I draw some conclusions about the meaning of the dissonance between narrative and procedural layers in *Watch Dogs* and how both, but especially player action and the gameworlds' ambient operations, function as figurations of playing American, one more crucial aspect of the videogames needs to be addressed: the racial(izing) dynamics that undergird most of the features examined so far. This side of the *Watch Dogs* franchise, I argue, is central to its rendering of acts of playing American and, hence, to its cultural work in the reproduction of American culture.

## 3.4 Anti-Black Boxes and Black Bodies: Racializing Surveillance in *Watch Dogs*

The previous sections have demonstrated that *Watch Dogs* attempts to tell stories serving as warnings about the far-reaching and often harmful effects of surveillance, digital profiling, and predictive algorithms while the videogames' procedural layer, particularly in the form of ambient operations and player action, replicates real-world surveillance practices and the logics on which these are

based. The series' politics, therefore, remain ambivalent at best, as I elaborate in this chapter's conclusion. This final subchapter further complicates the matter as it dissects the racial(izing) dynamics underlying *Watch Dogs*' narratives as well as gameplay by contextualizing it within an ongoing discourse on race, surveillance, and predictive policing.

Public reactions to learning about the extent of contemporary surveillance practices by intelligence agencies and surveillance capitalists frequently amount to feelings of shock at the fact that everyone is affected by digital surveillance. The outrage, of course, is justified; everyone has a right to privacy, even as this right is steadily eroded in an always-online world. Yet the sentiment also reveals a peculiar perception of extant surveillance practices. Fixating on the ubiquity and universality of contemporary digital surveillance implies that, perhaps, things would not be as bad if only some people were surveilled, people other than oneself. Shock at the sudden realization of being surveilled without a proper cause betrays a certain privilege; surveillance here is perceived as something not only unwarranted but unexpected, even unfamiliar.

This matters precisely because, while being universal and comprehensive, the workings of the black box society do not affect everyone in the same way or to the same degree; quite the contrary, the scholars who study its practices and institutions frequently point out that certain groups suffer significantly more than others. O'Neil, for example, describes one of her revelations after working for the big data industry like this: "I wondered what the analogue to the credit crisis might be in Big Data. Instead of a bust, I saw a growing dystopia, with inequality rising. The algorithms would make sure that those deemed losers would remain that way" (48). The black box society is, as firmly as ever, stratified along lines of race, class, gender, ability, and more (Pasquale 38).

Despite being ubiquitous and comprehensive today, surveillance is by no means universal; the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of surveillance, particularly in the United States are readily exposed. "Surveillance," as Simone Browne, for instance, writes in her book *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, "is nothing new to black folks. It is the fact of antiblackness" (10). A similar argument can be made about many groups and individuals outside of the dominant White, Christian, heterosexual norm who have long been subjected to different forms of state surveillance, including BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color), Muslim Americans, and LGBTQIA people. Whereas Edward Snowden's unsurprising yet shocking revelations about the extent of the American surveillance state generated a broad public awareness and discussion of the problem of surveillance, what is generally omitted is the fact that a comprehensive state of surveillance has always been in place for different kinds of bodies. For these groups, surveillance by the hands of their own country has long been an everyday reality.

Both *WD* and *WD2*, I argue, reproduce the racialized (ine)qualities of surveillance practices in the United States as both whiteness and Blackness organize the functioning of surveillance in the gameworlds. The representation of surveillance in the first two *Watch Dogs* videogames works to conceal the uneven application and effects of surveillance in the real world at the same time as the colorblindness governing the gameworlds throws into relief the racializing nature of surveillance as expressed through some of *Watch Dogs*' characters. Here surveillance presents itself as "racializing surveillance – when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries along racial lines, thereby reifying race, and where the outcome of this is often discriminatory and violent treatment" (Browne 8). *WD* and *WD2* both erase the realities of racializing surveillance in their conceptualization and simulation of the black box society and prominently feature characters who embody the painful histories and present of racializing surveillance in the United States. This line of argumentation necessitates revisiting several of the aspects examined before and to analyze them with a different pair of eyes, as it were, one attuned to the ubiquitous factor of race in both representation and practice of surveillance. The first of these are the NPC profiles.

Earlier I mentioned that no two profiles in the *Watch Dogs* videogames are the same (Sinha). The reason for this is that the profiles are randomly generated for all NPCs who are unrelated to any of the scripted missions; rather than being handcrafted, an algorithm procedurally assembles profiles by combining different values from a database (Imtiaz). The problem with this system is that it does not consider any differences concerning who gets targeted for what in the acts of surveillance insinuated by the profiles. As indicated before, players witness an obsession with some notion of social deviance in the profiles, presumably from a "white heterosexual male" norm (Whitson and Simon 315), while the profiles simultaneously appear to operate as an algorithmic equalizer. NPCs are overwhelmingly represented as deviant in some way, meaning that everyone in this world is deviant. As none of the characters' features relate to any other in any discernably static way, removing explicit discrimination from the equation, the approach is implicitly colorblind. This kind of universalism works to obscure the history and persistence of discrimination through technology, in this case in the United States. "[A] universalizing lens," Ruha Benjamin cautions her readers, "may actually hide many of the dangers of discriminatory design, because in many ways Black people *already* live in the future" (32). That is to say that parts of the population have been subjected to surveillance and profiling long before computational algorithms took over. The *Watch Dogs* videogames, then, distort the racialized reality of surveillance in the United States. Besides a few nods to unspecified vulnerable individuals suffering the most under Blume's algorithms, there is little indication that communities of color, for example, are specifically targeted by more extensive or intensive surveil-

lance. As profiles are generated in a random manner, they do not account for the ways in which real-life profiles based on digital surveillance are frequently assembled along fault lines of difference deeply entrenched in discriminatory social and cultural structures and practices that have evolved over generations. The unequal effects a comprehensive surveillance regime as the one depicted in *Watch Dogs* has in a real world where race is still a determinant of life experiences rarely reveal themselves in these videogames.

In terms of character diversity, the *Watch Dogs* series certainly made a step forward with *WD2*, leaving behind the stock mainstream videogame protagonist – a tough, thirty-something, white cis man in crisis – for a relatable African American team player heading a diverse ensemble cast without falling into the trap of the common 'boy from the hood' stereotype of which other series like *Grand Theft Auto* are oftentimes found guilty (cf. Leonard, "Virtual Anti-Racism" 3–4). Marcus works well as a lead protagonist precisely because he is so inconspicuous. In his review for the *Rolling Stone*, Sidney Fussell explains:

> Given how uneasily some gamers accept black heroes, it'd almost be easy for Ubisoft to have Marcus quoting civil rights leaders or making impassioned speeches about racism or oppression to make a point. But, when you're black and in the public eye, there's no need to be political. All you have to do is show up. So instead of resting on the "importance" or "controversy" of the image of a black hacker, *Watch Dogs 2* smartly chose to just let Marcus be himself.

Moreover, introducing Marcus as someone wrongfully profiled by ctOS immediately carries the shadow of racial profiling even as this is not made explicit. Fussell continues:

> Ubisoft answered the question "Why is he black?" by highlighting the joy brimming at the center of the character during his fight. He's not somberly trying to dismantle the technocracy like Aiden or [*Mr. Robot*'s] Elliott. He feels the weight of pervasive surveillance and invasive technology every day, but he's resourceful, resilient, and carries on his mission of conquering oppression without being broken down or nihilistic. I can think of no better illustration of the black experience.

This is a compelling reading of Marcus, in what may well be the most sophisticated review of the game I have come across. All in all, the game was repeatedly lauded for the ways in which "diversity is championed throughout, from comments on the lack of black workers in a tech company to a prominent councilwoman who also happens to be transgender" (McKeand, "*Watch Dogs 2* Review").

Yet even *WD2* falls short precisely because "diversity is championed" *everywhere but* in the themes that matter the most to the videogame, "the power and the dangers of Big Data and predictive algorithms," as the Ubisoft website states ("Enter"). Yes, *WD2* promotes diversity and does so more than many other AAA

titles, and this is a welcome gesture; but if it aspires to formulate a serious critique of the harms caused by the black box society, it needs to channel its political investment in the cause of minorities suffering from discrimination into its procedural representation of the mechanisms of the black box society and, ideally, its gameplay. Early in *WD2*, Marcus is introduced as someone frequently targeted – read: racially profiled – and falsely accused by authorities through ctOS. Yet this perspective is conspicuously absent on a systemic, simulational level. If Marcus really represents a spot-on "illustration of the black experience" (Fussell), then not addressing this repeatedly on all layers of the videogame is more than a missed opportunity. While I agree that his mere presence in the game is already political, this does not automatically amount to an effective critical statement vis-à-vis systemic racism. This is why I am not convinced by reviews like Matt Kamen's of *Wired*, who writes: "*Watch Dogs 2* is unapologetic in exploring the reality of race relations in America today – and by extention [sic], most of the Western world. It's not just exploring racism but institutional racism, the nature of profiling and the damage that causes to real people's lives." It may be "unapologetic," but only because it hardly ever mentions anything related to everyday racism, and what passes as "exploring" for Kamen does not amount to much more than a one-liner here and there, most of which many players will not even notice. Yes, Marcus and Horatio (the other African American DedSec member) joking about being the only black guys on the Nudle campus, and a camera not recognizing Marcus because his "face is too dark" – representative of similar incidents in the real world, most famously the HP MediaSmart computer that did not recognize black faces (Browne 161–164) – are sharp comments on the racism of and in technology (cf. D). But these moments are tied to two very specific characters, instead of the ambioperative gameworld itself, thus remaining toothless since they do not affect gameplay whatsoever, which greatly reduces the potential for intense emotional player responses, especially outside of the two aforementioned cutscenes. If there is racial profiling through ctOS, players would not know simply by walking the streets and paying attention to their surroundings; for all that has happened to Marcus, not even he ever gets targeted outside of scripted missions.

Imagine there were, instead, a stop-and-frisk mechanic clearly attributed to race and interfering with Marcus's deeds in and outside of missions; this would involve players affectively in the everyday realities of non-white, and especially Black, Americans. Judging from past videogame controversies, such a game mechanic would likely be considered a kind of virtual blackfacing by some and, hence, being racist itself. Yet if videogames, especially those of the AAA sector, do not dare to explore this critical terrain – sensitively, of course – a great deal of critical potential promoting social change is squandered. Another open-world video-

game that also utilizes ambient operations to underscore its subject matter, 2K Games' *Mafia III*, attempted to venture into this territory, though not without producing problems of its own (cf. Hammar, "Playing"). Set in 1968 New Orleans and featuring a Black protagonist, *Mafia III* constructed a "virtual Jim Crow" by letting the protagonist's race determine how he is treated in different neighborhoods and by different NPCs, and thus subjecting him to racist abuse and denying him opportunities players would otherwise expect in an open-world videogame (Hammar, "Playing"). Besides the limits of this approach – as Emil Lundedal Hammar writes, "non-black players can dabble with simulated white supremacy in the game, yet still turn off the computer without those same worries" ("Playing") – *Mafia III* can get away with such game mechanics in the mass market because of its historical setting. Similar approaches to contemporary settings, such as those of the *Watch Dogs* franchise, would likely face more critical scrutiny and be treated less favorably by both ends of the political spectrum, thus posing a high risk in the AAA videogame sector oriented predominately toward maximization of profit for the publisher.

By not accounting for the "white gaze" ("Toni Morrison") – a dominant, racialized viewing position that uncritically assumes itself as an unmarked norm – that permeates surveillance technology in the fictional system depicted in the videogames, *Watch Dogs* actually reproduces a perspective suffused with "[t]he invisible power of Whiteness" (Benjamin 29). Its representation of digital profiling remains untouched by issues of race – a privilege based on "a location of structural advantage" and upheld by "a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenberg 1). This is especially visible in *Watch Dogs*' NPC profiles since "[d]atabase design," as Benjamin asserts, "is 'an exercise in world-building,' a normative process in which programmers are in a position to project their world views – a process that all too often reproduces the technology of race" (78). Race, then, often informs technological design invisibly, unless explicitly countered.

The representation of surveillance in *Watch Dogs* constitutes a form of racialized, but also racializing, surveillance precisely because it operates from a position of whiteness. The unmarked perspective itself must be viewed as racialized since it works in a manner that racializes both subject and object – that is, the player and the NPCs. This point is most obvious in *WD*, whose protagonist is white and well aware of his scopic power. But even in *WD2*, despite Marcus's Blackness, the player's gaze operates from a position of whiteness precisely because neither their nor Marcus' identity affect the system itself – remember that both Aiden and Marcus hacked into ctOS to delete their own profiles from the database, which not only exempts them from being surveilled but renders them unmarked and invisible. There is no essential difference between *WD* and *WD2*

here; although their approaches to representation differ greatly, the system underlying the simulation remains the same. This also means that gameplay based on the NPC profiles is shot through with the invisible power of whiteness. Although the procedurally-generated profiles are randomized and do not insinuate any correlations between race and the information displayed, the player's viewing position aligns with a scopic regime defined by whiteness – constantly watching, categorizing, and judging Others while never subjected to the same kind of mechanism. If "domination and surveillance typically go hand in hand with 'the pleasure of looking,'" (Benjamin 110), the gamic pleasures of scanning NPC profiles in *Watch Dogs* betray a similar power dynamic. This engagement with some of the gameworlds' ambient operations ultimately reproduces a discourse of universalism concerning twenty-first-century surveillance practices that negates long-standing and ongoing struggles against surveillance by groups outside of the dominant white norm.

This long history of the coupling of racism and surveillance in the United States is especially pronounced in the matter of biometrics, which also finds its representation in *Watch Dogs*. As pointed out earlier, the whole functioning of profiling in the videogames is based on facial recognition. This technology is one branch of a set of identification techniques usually called biometrics. "In simple terms," Browne explains, "biometrics is a technology of measuring the living body. The application of this technology is in the verification, identification, and automation practices that enable the body to function as evidence" (109). In one of the chapters in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, she traces the history of biometrics back to the transatlantic slave trade to demonstrate "that this history is in close alignment with the commodification of blackness" (128). She concludes:

> Current biometric technologies and slave branding, of course, are not one and the same; however, when we think of our contemporary moment when "suspect" citizens, trusted travelers, prisoners, welfare recipients, and others are having their bodies informationalized by way of biometric surveillance, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes without consent or awareness, and then stored in large-scale, automated databases, some managed by the state and some owned by private interests, we can find histories of these accountings of the body in, for example, the inventory that is the *Book of Negroes*, slave ship manifests that served maritime insurance purposes, banks that issued insurance policies to slave owners against the loss of enslaved laborers, and branding as a technology of tracking blackness that sought to make certain bodies legible as property. (128)

If, accepting Browne's conclusion, we consider slave branding as one of the origins of human biometrics, this horrendous practice makes an uncanny appearance in *WD*. Part of *WD*'s main story line involves taking down a human trafficking ring. During the course of this, in a mission called "A Risky Bid," players infiltrate a se-

cret auction of female sex slaves presented on a stage in front of potential bidders. Regardless of the women's varied ethnicities, the scene requires little imagination in relating it to the auctions of African slaves on the American continent during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The history and horror of the transatlantic slave trade and American slavery thus acquire a haunting presence in *Watch Dogs* as their visual archive collapses into a videogame representation of contemporary human trafficking enabled by digital technology.

Yet in the preceding mission, called "Stare into the Abyss," players witness something even more uncanny. To collect first-hand information about the human trafficking ring, Aiden needs to gain access to an underground fetish club. He succeeds by stealing and temporarily taking on the identity of Nicholas Crispin, a rich expatriate with a history of brutalizing and killing women for sexual pleasure; Crispin is killed by Aiden in the process. As Aiden enters the club, it is revealed that the club's owner – the operator of the human trafficking ring – has prepared a "gift" for Crispin, together with an invitation to the auction, which Aiden needs to undermine its operation. This "gift" turns out to be a young African American woman called Poppy (though her real name is Donna Dean). Almost naked, she has to wait for Crispin in a kind of VIP room, so that he can do to her whatever he pleases. Poppy's appearance, however, stands out not only for her nudity but also for a different reason. Her head is shaved clean and she wears a number of visible metal piercings: a nose ring attached by two chains to an ear ring, which is connected to another ear ring by several other chains – a truly evocative appearance. When Aiden enters the room, Poppy attacks him because she has heard the stories about Crispin, but Aiden is able to fend her off. He explains that he is, in fact, not Crispin and that he wants to help her. Just before Poppy attacks Aiden, his eyes catch what appears to be a tattoo on Poppy's neck. Later, when he infiltrates the auction, still disguised as Crispin, and talks to the operation's kingpin, Aiden takes Poppy away under a pretense and asks her about the tattoo, to which she responds: "It's a tracking device beneath the skin. It's all so very efficient for business."

Within two short cutscenes, a specter appears in *WD* – the specter of the brutal history of the transatlantic slave trade and American slavery and its role in the promotion of biometrics. In *WD*'s 2014 Chicago, players encounter a young African American woman being held as a slave to white men. Her body is marked and made legible in two distinct ways. Diegetically, Poppy's tattoo marks her as someone else's property, enabling that someone to track her everywhere she goes. The visual cues – her skin, facial features, shaved head, piercings and chains – also mark her as more than an African American woman. Her bodily appearance urges players to read her as a revenant of American slavery; Poppy's body is legible to the player beyond the fiction of the videogame. This may not be the result of the developers' intentions. More likely, Poppy's character design con-

stitutes yet another example of the common reproduction of long-standing and persistent stereotypes that frequently exoticize African American women and mark them as the Other in American culture, indeed the negative upon which white male supremacy rests. With its gratuitous depiction of vulnerable, naked women, this example also demonstrates how the white gaze, in the game as well as in past and present surveillance regimes, is closely coupled with a heterosexual male gaze that both controls and takes pleasure in watching female bodies (cf. Mulvey). Although *WD2* displays a more inclusive and more complex representation of gendered identities, the *Watch Dogs* series, generally, is still defined by a male gaze because of its protagonists and other narrative and visual design choices.

This racialized and racializing operation of biometrics goes beyond the diegetic level as it invites *WD* players, too, to decode the information encoded in Poppy's body through something akin to "a technology of tracking blackness that sought to make certain bodies legible as property" (Browne 128). In these moments, the violent history of American slavery and the commodification of Black bodies returns like an apparition in the figure of Poppy – in her Black female body, specifically – and converges with twenty-first-century biometric surveillance technology. Alas, *WD* does not further engage the symbolic significance of this extraordinary scene, and instead, *Watch Dogs*' operation from a position of whiteness becomes apparent. Aiden, true to the racist trope of the white savior, simply scrambles the signal of the tracking device beneath Poppy's skin with his phone, and she is free to flee.

Here *Watch Dogs*' colorblindness reveals itself as ignorance, disavowing the past suffering of, and ongoing discrimination against, BIPOC in the United States, which goes back to American slavery and settler colonialism and which continues under "the New Jim Code," which Benjamin defines as "*the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era*" (5–6). Biometric technology, including current facial recognition technology, continues to be an important site of the entanglements of racialized surveillance, technological innovation, and discrimination. Its depiction in *Watch Dogs*, however, veers closer to a vantage point akin to the privilege bestowed by whiteness, which is one way in which (the representation of) surveillance practices can work as racializing. Real-life applications of facial recognition software in the United States, especially in law enforcement, often rely on databases containing disproportionate numbers of BIPOC, especially African Americans, while the technology itself works only poorly with faces of darker skin complexion (Benjamin 112). In contrast, *Watch Dogs*' ctOS seems to treat every resident the same, which portrays such technologies in a more benevolent way than they deserve.

A similar dynamic is at work in *WD*'s Crime Detection events and their representation of predictive policing, which is the last point revisited here. These events not only "[enlist] the player (via Aiden) to enforce ctOS's legal order" (Ng and Macdonald 182), they essentially also cause the player to help sustain the dominant white order.

Both place-based and person-based predictive policing rely on large amounts of historical crime data that is automatically transformed into forecasts through analysis, interpretation, and extrapolation by machine-learning algorithms. Although ostensibly objective, the very design of these technologies produces instances of discrimination as it reproduces racist patterns of the past. For example, non-white communities, especially African Americans, have historically been disproportionately targeted by law enforcement. If this biased data is used to train machine-learning algorithms, they will likely reproduce the bias even if race is not a factor in the algorithms themselves (Ferguson 47–52). Especially place-based predictive policing "runs the risk of creating its own self-fulfilling prediction" here, as Ferguson reminds his readers (74). Pasquale draws a similar conclusion when he reasons that "if police focus their efforts on minority communities, more minorities may end up with criminal records, regardless of whether minorities generally commit more crimes" (38; cf. O'Neil 86–87). Rather than reducing bias in policing, then, such procedures may reinforce established racist patterns while cloaking them in a veneer of algorithmic neutrality. As predictive policing focuses on particular kinds of crime, which correlate with a particular class, which correlates with particular places, which correlate with non-white minorities (cf. Ferguson 75; Benjamin 35), it is ill-equipped to reduce racist bias and discrimination. If anything, predictive policing has so far shown to result in the same focus on BIPOC, especially African Americans, as its forebears in traditional, analog policing (Ferguson 47–52, 73–79). Predictive policing in the United States, therefore, is a prime example of ongoing practices of racialized surveillance with new, algorithmic tools, in which "the output of Jim Crow policies" becomes "the input of New Jim Code practices" (Benjamin 147).

The procedural and representational logics of *WD*'s Crime Detection Events must be understood against the background of such real-world law enforcement techniques, not least because *WD* is set in a city where these are presently used. The black-boxed system of the crime prediction and the surveillance of innocent and unsuspicious citizens to identify wanted suspects closely resembled similar real-world practices. The latter often has a racialized dimension when a particular group is targeted because of superficial, assumed similarities between them and the suspect, often boiling down to visual markers like skin tone, hair and eye color, hairstyle, and dress. This racialized dimension is conspicuously absent in *WD*'s iteration of the practice. Since players do not know who they are looking for, they must consider every NPC as potentially involved; racial profiling would

be futile. Simultaneously, the person-based system also exhibits a dimension of place. The initial information only suggests that the crime will happen nearby, which creates a small geographical zone on which to focus one's surveillance. In the videogame, there is no indication that the location has been determined by historical data informed by racist structures; it purely relates to the likely whereabouts of the targets in question. The policing of places in *WD* as an intermediate step to policing people, then, appears to be detached from the histories of those places themselves and of the people who inhabit them – quite unlike the procedures applied by police across the United States.

As elaborated earlier, ctOS's crime prediction never fails; it does not seem to produce any false positives, following a logic of computational neutrality and infallibility replacing human error. This is a common justification for ever more automatization not only in law enforcement but also in other areas of public life. The circumstance that algorithms often carry over the biases of their creators and that they are prone to errors themselves, besides relying on data often already infested with error, becomes a concern only after the fact (cf. Ferguson 50–53). With its infallible algorithms, then, ctOS is closer to the utopia presented by predictive policing marketers than to the disillusioning reality of predictive policing in practice.

By rendering predictive policing universal, infallible, and colorblind, *WD* erases the lived realities of poor and predominately African American communities in the United States who have been the major target of policing for centuries. Operating from a privileged perspective of whiteness, *WD*'s representation of predictive policing foregrounds the merits that have been promised but not realized, and it omits any indication of potential disparities in how different types of people are handled by the system. Surveillance is racialized here because it is whitewashed. As race is omitted as a discernible factor in *WD*'s depiction of predictive policing, the videogame is all the more haunted by the racist practices it ignores.

Foregrounding the perspective of whiteness in the design of *Watch Dogs*' world and its procedures does not devalue the significance of Marcus as a Black protagonist and the importance of his experiences. It highlights, on the contrary, the colorblindness that exists next to a representational layer championing diversity and anti-racist politics on the surface and that runs much deeper in the simulation underneath. Paradoxically, racialized surveillance is both overlooked in the procedural design of *Watch Dogs* – even if it occasionally appears on the narrative level – *and* reproduced as surveillance by the player who generally operates from a privileged position, which aligns with the structural advantage of whiteness. As Murray aptly summarizes, "[e]ven the refusal to engage with identity is a privilege that only a particular segment of the population is able to sustain, through their perceived normativity" (46).

Urging the field of "game studies to take seriously the ways in which games and gaming culture are indelibly marked by the reanimation of white supremacy," TreaAndrea Russworm asks: "Specifically, what might it mean for the field of game studies to make the persistence of white supremacy central to how we play, write about, and teach video games?" (75). One answer to this question is to attend to the gaps and silences in videogame representations. "Anti-Blackness is no glitch" (Benjamin 82); it is a feature of surveillance technologies in the United States. Fixating on the black box of surveillance on its own terms can easily obscure how quickly and how frequently it turns into an "*anti-Black box*" (Benjamin 35). Surveillance in the United States has always been racialized and racializing. Representations that do not take this into account are ill-equipped to offer effective critiques of comprehensive surveillance regimes like that depicted in *Watch Dogs*. At worst, they can render invisible the struggles of those who are most exposed.

## 3.5 Conclusion: Playing American in *Watch Dogs*

"Popular culture representations of surveillance," Simone Browne writes, "are some of the ways that the public comes to know these technologies and also how ideas about certain technologies as necessary surveillance and security measures get rationalized and sold to the general public. In other words, 'our experience of surveillance is itself shaped by popular culture'" (121). This is an understanding similar to Jagoda's argument about the role of network aesthetics in the network society, and one can, without a doubt, expand Browne's statement to the workings of the black box society more generally as well. The defining characteristics of the world of *Watch Dogs* make the videogames compellingly timely pieces: the smart city craze, mass surveillance, data mining, digital profiling, cybercrime, predictive policing, and so forth. Yet the franchise's politics remain ambivalent at best. One part of the reason here are the different narrative foci of *WD* and *WD2*, which becomes apparent in the developer's overviews of both games on the Ubisoft website. Here is the description of *WD*:

> All it takes is the swipe of a finger. We connect with friends. We buy the latest gadgets and gear. We find out what's happening in the world. But with that simple swipe, we cast an increasingly expansive shadow. With each connection, we leave a digital trail that tracks our every move and milestone, our every like and dislike. And it's not just people. Today, all major cities are networked. Urban infrastructures are monitored and controlled by complex operating systems.

> In Watch_Dogs, this system is called the Central Operating System (ctOS) – and it controls almost every piece of the city's technology and holds key information on all the city's residents.
>
> You play as Aiden Pearce, a brilliant hacker and former thug, whose criminal past led to a violent family tragedy. Now on the hunt for those who hurt your family, you'll be able to monitor and hack all who surround you by manipulating everything connected to the city's network. Access omnipresent security cameras, download personal information to locate a target, control traffic lights and public transportation to stop the enemy . . . and more.
>
> Use the city of Chicago as your ultimate weapon and exact your own style of revenge. ("Watch Dogs")

And this is the one for *WD2*:

> In 2016, ctOS 2.0, an advanced operating system networking city infrastructure, was implemented in several US cities to create a safer, more efficient metropolis.
>
> Play as Marcus Holloway, a brilliant young hacker living in the birthplace of the tech revolution, the San Francisco Bay Area. Team up with Dedsec, a notorious group of hackers, and expose the hidden dangers of ctOS 2.0, which, in the hands of corrupt corporations, is being wrongfully used to monitor and manipulate citizens on a massive scale.
>
> With the power of hacking and Dedsec by your side, launch the Hack of the Century, take down ctOS 2.0 and give freedom back to whom it belongs: the people. ("Watch Dogs 2")

While one could easily imagine the opening lines of the *WD* summary to appear somewhere in Pasquale's book, this self-description highlights the true nature of the videogame's narrative focus. It is a story of revenge, in which the reach of ctOS, while being acknowledged, features as nothing but a means to an end; challenging the system itself appears to be of no concern, and this very much holds true during the course of *WD*. In contrast, *WD2* is framed as a cautionary tale and a story of liberation, in which the exceptional few free the unknowing masses. It appears as if the franchise discovered its political aspiration only in the sequel. This is confirmed, for instance, by producer Dominic Guay. Before the release of *WD*, he stated: "We like to say that in Watch Dogs we're lifting the veil on the reality that surrounds us. So we're not judging it. We're not saying it's good or bad. That's up to the player to define [for] himself what he thinks of it" (qtd. in Hall). Note, however, that *Watch Dogs*' publisher Ubisoft has a reputation of denying that their videogames, which include several highly successful and politically resonant franchises, engage in any kind of political discourse (E. Pfister; cf. Parkin).

By the time *WD2* is released, Guay acknowledges the importance of putting the franchise's resonances center stage:

> We wanted to pin the narrative to the core thematics . . . . So I think our thematics were very present in the world of the first Watch Dogs, but they were always in the backdrop. We wanted to bring that forward, centering our story on that. We wanted to inspire ourselves from either current events or historical events – contemporary events that were linked to

> our thematics of interconnectivity, hyperconnectivity and also to the location we chose, which is San Francisco Bay. (qtd. in McKeand, "*Watch Dogs 2*'s Politically")

This change in focus was met with approval by many players, as this post by *reddit* user Kitty_Mercury exemplifies:

> WD2's greatest improvement over WD1 may be the readjusted focus of the story. Having BLUME, and other corrupt corporations in general, as the core antagonistic force of the story is critical to Watch_Dogs' premise IMO. For some reason, BLUME and ctOS feel like a backdrop for a story about a vigilante fighting gangs and assorted criminals in WD1, which is absolutely ridiculous. WD2 flipped it around – BLUME and ctOS serve as the primary threat the protagonists face, while the local gangs still play an important role in the story, as well as the game's world overall. (Famixofpower)

It should be granted, though, that the worlds of both titles – independent of their individual narratives – inherently, if somewhat implicitly, raise concerns about a society defined by surveillance and digital profiling, which is why it seems fair to read both games at least partly as the same kind of dystopia. Even so, the videogames' politics do not entirely convince everyone, as *Forbes* reviewer Paul Tassi's verdict of *Watch Dogs 2* illustrates: "Still, overall it's a little hard to make out if *Watch Dogs* is actually trying to *say* anything other than 'selling people's data is wrong and corporations are probably bad,' as the game's critique of Silicon Valley's shortcomings isn't exactly nuanced."

The more important point, however, is how the videogames' procedural rhetorics undermine their representational investment in *Watch Dogs*' matters of concern and how the whitewashing of surveillance and policing practices that are thoroughly racialized in the real-world works to confirm the efficacy of such practices. This is the terrain where the *Watch Dogs* videogames and its players are playing American.

The major problem with *Watch Dogs* is not that "the developers . . . are ruining their own argument by including the option of violence and unavoidable story moments that go against the ethical values of its characters," as John J. Fennimore concludes (58), but that what players encounter in *Watch Dogs*' gameplay is something like an inversion of reality. The scholars specializing in the matter thematized in the videogames each in their own way emphasize the power differentials inherent in the application of big data, surveillance, and predictive algorithmic technologies. In their accounts, power is overwhelmingly concentrated in actors like corporations, law enforcement, and governments; individuals are described increasingly defenseless and vulnerable, at the whim of powerful technologies and the actors utilizing them. Pasquale's book, in particular, conclusively demonstrates that individuals are often rendered powerless precisely because they do not have access to the very systems that affect their lives while remaining shrouded in secrecy. In the

*Watch Dogs* videogames, the opposite is the case. Whereas their narrative elements, particularly in the DedSec broadcasts in *WD2*, constantly point to the exploitative applications of the respective technologies, the player is empowered, during gameplay, through the same technologies that are allegedly criticized. Despite *WD2*'s backstory, in which Marcus is falsely suspected of a crime he did not commit due to a mistake made by the program, players are never actually the victims of ctOS. On the contrary, they always and without exception draw their advantages from it; more cameras equal more options for connection equal more information available equal more power for the player equal fewer problems in solving the videogames' challenges.

Now, two of the truisms of game studies are that videogames are "*action-based*" (Galloway, *Gaming* 3), in the sense that "they exist when enacted" (Galloway, *Gaming* 2), and that they are "*ergodic*" (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1), in the sense that they recognize the player's presence in their world and that the player's actions affect the composition of the representation on the screen – though especially the second one has been challenged, for example by James Newman. Both characteristics endow the medium of the videogame with distinct ways of expressing matters of concern. This can, for instance, take the form of what Miguel Sicart calls "*ethical gameplay*," which he defines "as the ludic experience in which regulations, mediation, or goals require from the player moral reflection beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities" (*Beyond* 24). In her book *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, Katherine Isbister likewise asserts that, "[b]ecause they depend on active player choice, games have an additional palette of social emotions at their disposal" (9). Insights like these, which are also being harnessed by the serious games movement, which designs videogames specifically for purposes like education or politics, point to the ways in which videogames are capable of providing effective – because affective – engagements with their matters of concern through exactly the features that distinguish them formally.

The *Watch Dogs* videogames, however, do none of the above. At no point does the player feel powerless in the face of corporate ploys, invasive technologies, and predictive algorithms. Quite the contrary: For every DedSec broadcast revealing another scandalous behavior, for every comment by one of the main characters expressing shock about the ways in which state-of-the-art surveillance technology is put to use, the player profiles countless NPCs, smirks at dozens of intercepted private text messages and phone calls, employs myriad surveillance cameras to see without being seen, and so forth. Rather than generating shock value, rather than instilling in the player a feeling of impotency, *Watch Dogs*' major unit operations are every bit the same power fantasy mainstream videogames have so often been accused of. Just as many military-themed first-person shooters "make virtual war fun" (Payne 206), the *Watch Dogs* videogames make

surveillance and profiling enjoyable precisely because the player is never the victim, never feels vulnerable to the technology. The player, after all, always plays a top-class hacker, not some average Joe failing to get credit for a home of his own because of some algorithmically calculated profile. Whereas "ludonarrative dissonance" (Hocking) can be used quite effectively when it is identified by and worked into a game itself, neither of the *Watch Dogs* titles discussed here seem to be aware of it; their occasional self-reflexivity, again, takes place entirely on the representational level.

Since *Watch Dogs*' ambioperative worlds and the gamic actions set in these actually replicate the mechanics of the black box society so well, players are bereft of the chance of ever feeling the impact of the systems they manipulate themselves, with the possible exception of the online hacking modes. In the *Watch Dogs* videogames, players are playing American because they are playing the black box society precisely in the sense that they are reenacting its workings, its logic, through their own gamic actions. Yet they never have to confront the consequences of these actions; all critique is uncoupled from player action and solely conveyed narratively on the fictional level. This division has implications for the politics of the *Watch Dogs* series. As Galloway contends, "[t]he activity of gaming . . . only ever comes into being when the game is actually played, is an *undivided* act wherein meaning and doing transpire in the same gamic gesture" (*Gaming* 104). In this sense, the *Watch Dogs* videogames are less about the dangers of surveillance and profiling technologies specifically than they are about the power inherent in surveillance and profiling, which arguably forecloses any critical edge as long as this power emanates exclusively from the player, thus effectively precluding any experience of what it means to be subjected to this power during gameplay.

The affirmative effect, concerning contemporary practices of surveillance and profiling, of *Watch Dogs*' gameplay is further amplified by the near complete ignorance of the racialized, and often racist, design of such practices in the real world. Both *Watch Dogs*' ambioperative gameworlds and players of the videogames play American as they operate from a position of whiteness while cloaking their algorithmic systems in a veneer of colorblindness. Race does not seem to play a role and, therefore, matters even more. Similar to many of the real-world systems that inspire the videogames, universalism and propagated neutrality work to conceal extant inequalities and systemic discrimination. The *Watch Dogs* videogames, then, reproduce American culture both in their emulation of distinctly American surveillance practices in gameplay and in their adoption of a view of surveillance as universal that disregards race-based discrimination. In the context of contemporary digital surveillance, fixating on universality can have the effect of ignoring or even delegitimizing that same regime's ongoing un-

equal effects on different (groups of) people, which ultimately perpetuates discrimination. It is evident that popular culture is one channel through which surveillance technology becomes known to and is normalized by the general population (Browne 121). Videogames are a form of popular culture that not only depicts such technologies but allows players to engage with them on a simulational, systemic level. Despite their apparent critical aspirations, then, *WD* and *WD2* actually confirm the status quo more than they appear to challenge it; *Watch Dogs*' cultural work, from this perspective, is the work of eliciting shock on the surface while entrenching the practices underlying the matter perceived as shocking even further in the everyday activity of playing videogames.

Discussing, in 2005, the artistic dimension and consequent political potential of *San Andreas*, Murray contends that "if we can't recognize the satirical characterizations of American culture within these games, perhaps it is because we resemble them too much" (98). Regarding *Watch Dogs*, one can turn around her conclusion in the sense that, if these videogames fall short of challenging the black box society, this is because they resemble it too much. While if, as Galloway argues, videogames "solve the problem of political control, not by sublimating it as does the cinema, but by *making it coterminous with the entire game*" (*Gaming* 92), then *Watch Dogs*, too, solves the problem of surveillance and digital profiling by making it coterminous with the entire videogame. By playing American in the sense of replicating dominant surveillance regimes and prompting players to act in accordance with them, *WD* and *WD2*, as elaborated in this chapter, reproduce American cultures of surveillance.

# 4 Once (+n) Upon A Time, There Was the (Simulated) West: *Red Dead Redemption* and the Database Western

Consider the Western. As the quintessential American genre, first in literature then in film, the Western has been at the forefront of imagining the national project of the United States since the nineteenth century. From its beginnings until today, the genre has been marked by a dialectic between two different American histories referenced at the same time: the past and the present, the latter understood here as the context each individual Western entered upon publication. Up to this day, the imaginary of the Western, and the myths it created, remain both a reference point for the American nation to look to in times of distress – such as George W. Bush's evocation of Western tropes in the response to 9/11 (McVeigh vii–viii) – and a foil onto which any crisis occupying the United States at any given point can be projected and played out. Fashions come and go, new eras are ushered in and fade away eventually, social climates fluctuate – but the Western remains, in one form or another.

Yet genres themselves are perpetually unstable, always in flux. Common descriptors like 'classic Western,' 'revisionist Western,' 'postmodern Western,' or even 'Postwestern' and 'Neo-Western' already point to the ways in which the genre has always been subject to historical change as well as marked by a heterogeneity often not reflected in popular representations. It is, therefore, somewhat inaccurate to speak of *the* Western, as if it were a unified whole. Indeed, as Jim Kitses writes, the genre is better described as "a varied and flexible structure, a thematically fertile and ambiguous world of historical material shot through with archetypal elements which are themselves ever in flux" ("Authorship" 63). This kind of change is to a large degree defined by temporality, that is, by changing historical contexts. But what about changing media? According to Jane Tompkins, the choice of a specific medium for a Western does not seem to matter much:

**Note:** Parts of chapter 4 were previously published as "Narrative Liminality, Ambient Operations, and the Database Western in Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* Videogames" in *Beyond Narrative: Exploring Narrative Liminality and Its Cultural Work*, edited by Sebastian M. Herrmann, Katja Kanzler, and Stefan Schubert, Transcript, 2022, pp. 97–112.

Parts of chapter 4 were previously published as "The Gameworld, The Interface, and the Genre: *Red Dead Redemption* and the Western in the Digital Age" in *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, edited by John Wills and Esther Wright, U of Oklahoma P, 2023, pp. 27–44.


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> For when you read a Western novel or watch a Western movie on television, you are in the same world no matter what the medium: the hero is the same, the story line is the same, the setting, the values, the actions are the same. The media draw on each other: movies and television programs are usually based on novels and short stories; conversely, when you read *Hondo*, you're likely to think of John Wayne. So when I say "Western" I mean everything from a comic book or a fifteen-minute radio show to a feature film or a full-length novel. What matters is not the medium but the identity of the imaginative world. Just as you know, when you turn the television on, whether you're watching a science fiction serial or a sitcom, you know when you're in a Western. (7)

Such an assessment applies a coarse view that looks for similarities in rather general categories like 'hero' or 'setting.' Besides overlooking not only the variations within such categories but also the multiplicity of categories existent across the genre – think, for example, of the Western narratives produced by writers like Willa Cather and Laura Ingalls Wilder – Tompkins also ignores the finer details of how the categories she invokes may play out differently according to the affordances of each medium. On an operational and aesthetic level – for example, how a particular generic trope is realized and to what effect – a literary Western is evidently not quite like a cinematic one. The main reason why the specificity of the medium is easily overlooked in the kind of genre criticism practiced by Tompkins above is that all her examples are predominately narrative media. This is the reason why the things she lists "are the same" across media: they are all narrative categories. Even *setting*, as a term, only makes sense as it describes a location where some kind of narrative is set; in this sense, a setting is not the same as, for instance, a landscape or a world. Westerns are necessarily realized differently and, thus, produce different experiences and effects in different media; the aesthetic experience of reading about the landscapes of the West in a novel, for instance, is arguably vastly different from watching John Ford's extreme long shots of Monument Valley. What holds all of them together as something perceived, however inaccurately, as an undivided genre is narrative organization (Kitses, "Autorship" 68). The question is, then, what happens to the Western once the primacy of narrative gives way to something else, to a different symbolic form that organizes its constituent elements? This is the initial question from which this chapter proceeds as it examines Rockstar Games' popular *Red Dead Redemption* franchise.[9]

**9** *RDR* was preceded by the more linear third-person shooter *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), which featured discrete, albeit large, levels rather than an open gameworld. *Red Dead Revolver*, however, was a videogame originally conceived by a different studio and publisher, Angel Studios/Capcom, which was then completed by Rockstar Games after their parent company Take-Two Interactive purchased Angel Studios and the rights to their videogames. While Rockstar Games

Published in 2010 for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 to overwhelmingly positive reviews and critical acclaim, *RDR* took the well-proven open-world gameplay formula of the *Grand Theft Auto* series and married it to the Western theme of its forebear *Red Dead Revolver*. In *RDR*, which is set in a fictional 1911 American West, players take on the role of John Marston, a former outlaw turned homesteader who is being blackmailed into hunting down his old comrades of the Van der Linde gang in exchange for peace and freedom for his wife and son. *RDR2*, released in 2018 for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One – a year later also for PC – and met with similar critical acclaim, presents a prequel to its predecessor. It tells the story of the final months of the gang in 1899, the increasing alienation of its members, and its inevitable breakup, focalized through the persona of the playable protagonist Arthur Morgan, gang leader Dutch van der Linde's closest confidant. Players control the protagonists from a third-person perspective – though *RDR2* offers the possibility of a first-person point of view – and spend their time in the gameworlds shooting guns, riding horses, collecting bounties, robbing trains, and much more. Besides completing the central plots through so-called story missions – which are entirely optional, though serving as a major attraction and motivation to play – players can freely explore and interact with the lively ambioperative gameworlds and engage in a variety of other quests and activities that have nothing to do with the main story lines.

Most of the academic writing on *Red Dead Redemption* – which, given the franchise's popularity, has remained surprisingly scarce compared to other similarly popular franchises – tends to proceed from an alignment of the videogames with Western films, which is reasonable given their myriad intertextual references and Rockstar Games' long history of drawing heavily on the iconography of popular culture, particularly American film, in their worldbuilding. Sara Humphreys, for instance, asserts that *RDR*'s "missions . . . follow the genre conventions of the popular Western" (201). Benjamin J. Triana writes that the game "fits within the realm of the Revisionist-Western genre" (2). Jason W. Buel argues that it is more specifically inspired especially by the films of Sam Peckinpah and that "[t]hough the game is a revisionist Western generally, it draws heavily on stylistic and narrative events from one particular revisionist Western film: *The Wild Bunch* (1969)" (54), though, such categorizations of revisionist Westerns, as Esther

did turn the project into their own, thus founding the larger *Red Dead* franchise, *RDR* was arguably the title that started the series properly since it was developed by Rockstar San Diego from scratch, borrowing heavily from the success formula of Rockstar Games' flagship franchise *Grand Theft Auto*. Due to the different structural design, I therefore do not consider *Red Dead Revolver* part of the *Red Dead Redemption* series for the sake of my analysis.

Wright points out, follow a particular pattern of genre canonization privileging violence and masculinity rather than representing the complexity of the Western genre throughout history (*Rockstar* 76).

All these perceptive assessments are, without a doubt, correct in relating *RDR*'s main story line to the genre it operates in, and they arguably also hold true for *RDR2*. Yet these stories are only one part of the Western experiences offered and instantiated by these videogames, and not necessarily the most important one. Even though the accounts of *RDR* cited above all draw attention to the fact that it is an open-world videogame and that this form affords distinct kinds of gameplay, and despite Buel's thought-provoking analogy between open-world videogame design and the civilization/wilderness binary common to the Western and the frontier myth (50), all these authors cling tightly to John Marston's story as told through the main quests. As soon as the analytic focus shifts to the manifold things that happen in *Red Dead Redemption*'s ambioperative gameworlds, however, previous readings of the videogames are complicated to the extent that another relation between *Red Dead Redemption* and the Western genre emerges.

In this chapter, which is the final case study, I argue that *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds are central to understanding the series' cultural relationship to the Western. *RDR* and *RDR2* disrupt the genre because their functional design does not merely constitute yet another instantiation of familiar generic elements; it is not merely a case of "transmedia adaptation" (Razzi 302). In fact, it produces something genuinely new: a reconfiguration of the user's relationship to the Western. This reconfiguration, I contend, results from the ways in which *Red Dead Redemption*'s ambioperative gameworlds function as databases and interfaces, producing a new form of the Western operating on the logics of the digital age. These gameworlds work as interfaces in a double sense. Outwardly, they function as 'cultural interfaces' to the Western, which make the genre accessible to the player within the limits set by the developers' conception of the Western. Inwardly, they are 'software interfaces,' which provide random access to a database of select generic tropes to be enacted at either the player's or the machine's behest. Due to this principle of operation, *RDR* and *RDR2* constitute 'database Westerns,' which are at once technological and generic formations. The technical operations and the logic of genre work closely together to produce this new type of Western for the digital age. The cultural work that results from this is marked by a withdrawal from history and a politics of disavowal. *Red Dead Redemption*'s realization of playing American consists both in this reconfiguration of the quintessential American genre into the form of the database Western and in the database Western's production in the videogames' development. While the former reproduces American culture by both recreating playable versions of recognizable Western tropes and changing the operational foundation of the genre, the

latter epitomizes both the transnational origin of American culture and some of the logics and practices of a global, neoliberal capitalism partly centered in the United States.

This chapter is structured in three parts. The first subchapter focuses on the operation of genre and the effect of *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds as interfaces to the Western genre at large, highlighting some of the continuities between the genre's history and the videogames. The following subchapter then analyzes the operations of the gameworlds themselves to delineate the transformation of the Western genre taking place in the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise, centered on the concepts of database and interface. The final part of the chapter shifts the perspective and examines the issue of the videogames' development as well as some material differences between the database Western and earlier forms of the genre. The chapter's conclusion finally arrives at a sketch of the politics of the database Western as it summarizes the ramifications of playing American in *Red Dead Redemption* and the resulting reproduction of American culture.

## 4.1 Genre, Interface, and a Narrow Vision of the Western

A genre is not a thing in the world, some tangible object with fixed boundaries, but a relational formation perpetually subjected to processes of definition and revision. In his work on television genres, in which he proposes an approach applicable to other media as well, Jason Mittell convincingly argues that "it is more useful to conceive of genres as *discursive practices*" as conceptualized by Michel Foucault (8). Mittell especially problematizes conceptions of genre as a property of texts in themselves and instead emphasizes practices of genre formation "within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" (7). "Although genres are categories of texts," he writes,

> texts themselves do not determine, contain, or produce their own categorization. Generic categories are intertextual and hence operate more broadly than within the bounded realm of a media text. Even though texts certainly bear marks that are typical of genres, these textual conventions are not what define the genre. Genres exist only through the creation, circulation, and reception of texts within cultural contexts. (Mittell 7–8)

Following his argument, no Western is a Western by itself; it rather becomes a Western because complex discursive processes have established, across a body of texts, certain characteristics that it shares and that, hence, render it readable as a Western. Defining the Western genre in any satisfying way in the first place remains difficult, contested, and prone to historical change. Although basic features such as the eponymous focus on the American West are easily agreed upon, more

exact criteria are quickly destabilized by a corpus rife with variation, innovation, and perpetual rejuvenation. This and the fact that some texts are assigned to the Western genre only retrospectively support Mittell's thoughts on the nature of genre (cf. Kitses, "Authorship" 57–68; Mueller, Buschendorf, and Sarkowsky 7–30; Neale 124–133). The reason why *Red Dead Redemption* is received as a Western in the first place is that central features of the videogames relate to established, and therefore recognizable, traits of many Westerns: wide open spaces in the historic American West, outlaws, gunfights, saloons, the railroad, and many more (cf. Wills, *Gamer* 64, 79; cf. Wright, *Rockstar* 73–90).

Because of this fluidity and contingency, a genre can only ever be approached partially through one (or several) of its instances, which will likely display some but not all the genre's conceived properties. One therefore depends on a specimen (say, a specific novel or an instance of generic ascription) to touch (parts of) a genre. The somewhat paradoxical side effect of this condition, however, is that the genre must be established *a priori* of using any sample as an example. Or, maybe less paradoxically, before one can approach a genre through one of its instances, one needs to establish the genre across a body of texts which, before this moment, must be considered autonomous entities but then emerge as related in some way, thus producing the genre in the first place. This is a process that, while absolutely crucial for genre formation and criticism – both of which are two sides of the same coin – is often taken for granted and rarely given consideration. It is only after the primary assembling act, however, that a distinct work may be used anew as an access point to the genre in whose assembly it has a part. In his appeal that "*[g]enre studies should negotiate between specificity and generality*," Mittell identifies "two general directions from which to approach any genre analysis" (17). The first would "start with a genre and analyze one specific element of it," while the second would "start with a specific media case study and analyze how genre processes operate within this specific instance" (17). Even these two approaches, however, presuppose the existence of genres, even the existence of specific generic formations (particularly in the first case). In this sense, then, genre analysis must always be hopelessly behind the cultural processes that have already produced and defined the genre in one way or another.

Once readable as belonging to the genre, any particular genre text takes on the function of an interface, a mediator between the audience and the genre. An interface can be understood "as a *form of relation"* in which some kind of exchange between two objects takes place (Hookway 4). More specifically, the term 'interface' also commonly refers to a functional component of the operator-machine circuit in personal computing. In this sense, interfaces often concern concrete (albeit sometimes virtual) objects that fulfill specific functions in computational data processing; examples range from peripherals (physical) to operating

systems (virtual). Interfaces, however, are not merely tangible things which perform particular functions, as Galloway cautions his readers:

> Interfaces are not simply objects or boundary points. They are autonomous zones of activity. Interfaces are not things, but rather processes that effect a result of whatever kind. For this reason I will be speaking not so much about particular interface objects (screens, keyboards), but *interface effects* . . . . Interfaces themselves are effects, in that they bring about transformations in material states. But at the same time interfaces are themselves the effects of other things, and thus tell the story of the larger forces that engender them. (*Interface* vii)

In this passage, Galloway stresses the fact that interfaces are neither isolated nor mere tools. Instead, he urges us to conceive of them as 'effects,' by which he means that they are both productive of new states of affairs but also the product of other agents' actions – not unlike the actor-network dynamics delineated in chapter 2. A computer mouse is not simply a technical device that can be plugged into a computer, but an effect that opens, closes, and scrolls through windows and tabs on a computer screen (yet another interface whose effect is the visualization of material hardware operations in a user-readable way). At the same time, it is a product of a variety of forces that enable, demand, and condition its existence, ranging from the prior establishment of graphical user interfaces (short: GUI), application cases that demand spatially accurate input, and able-bodied humans' capability and propensity to perform precise movements with their hands.

The crucial point here is the in-betweenness of the interface as the effect of mediating between two other entities which are not the interface: "The interface is this state of 'being on the boundary.' It is that moment where one significant material is understood as distinct from another significant material. In other words, an interface is not a thing, an interface is always an effect. It is always a process or a translation" (Galloway, *Interface* 33). There are two important points in Galloway's remarks here. Yes, there is some kind of exchange between two objects, but more importantly, it is the interface which not only facilitates the exchange but which also enables the user – and hence the reader, viewer, player, etc. – to treat the two entities as different from each other in the first place. "Technically speaking," Galloway explains, "the artificial distinction is the case all the way down: there is no *essential* difference between data and algorithm, the differentiation is purely artificial" (*Interface* 33). The interface thus allows interaction but also introduces difference where, technically, none may be. To return to the question of interface and genre, this means that in perceiving a particular work as an interface to a genre, one treats both as distinct from each other when they are really the same; there would be no genre were it not for this work and

others like it, and without the genre, the work could not be apprehended in this particular way.

To understand how *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds work as interfaces to the Western, one must identify the effects in their formation and ramifications. If "the interface is a form of relation" (Hookway 4), this has implications for the cultural work of media objects, a point to which I return in the conclusion. The case of *Red Dead Redemption* shows that the two senses of Galloway's interface effects are not necessarily separable from each other. This is especially visible in *RDR*'s gameworld. Rockstar Games' first original Western openly draws its inspirations from a particular brand of so-called revisionist Westerns that first emerged during the 1960s and inspired many successors for decades to come – the conception of the revisionist Western itself, I must note, has been challenged, most comprehensively perhaps in Andrew Patrick Nelson's *Still in the Saddle: The Hollywood Western, 1969–1980* (cf. Wright, *Rockstar* 74–80). These influences, most notably Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), define much of *RDR*'s narrative, visual, and aural design. While the videogame's "narrative is a thinly-veiled homage to Peckinpah's" (Wright, *Rockstar* 73; cf. Buel 53–54), the gameworld features many other references to different revisionist Westerns. Although *RDR*'s soundscape is dominated by ambient sounds such as NPCs, gunshots, animals, steam trains, and the weather, the game's original score, which adjusts dynamically to gameplay, bears resemblances to Ennio Morricone's iconic compositions for Sergio Leone's Westerns in its instrumentation, arrangement, and dramatic effect (Jeriaska).

From a technological perspective, *RDR*'s gameworld is an effect of a new generation of videogame consoles introduced in the mid-2000s. Just like the PlayStation 2 had enabled the watershed moment of *Grand Theft Auto*'s transition into three-dimensional gameworlds, the technologies of the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 proved a necessary precondition for the atmospheric, open gameworld of *RDR* (Robinson). Although Western videogames had existed at least since *The Oregon Trail* (1971), this kind of dynamic and responsive Western experience in a gameworld had not been possible before.

More than merely another Western videogame, *RDR* was perhaps the first genuine videogame Western. It does not only center on the Western and its generic markers by theming its game mechanics accordingly (cf. Juul 189, 199), as many titles had done before in genres ranging from shooters to real-time-strategy. Beyond that, *RDR* associates all media-specific affordances of the videogame with the essential pillars of the Western to the effect that it adds something to the genre that exceeds what could be done in Westerns before. To clarify, this is by no means an argument about quality, in the sense of ranking different Westerns or even different media according to some taxonomy. On the contrary, rather than claiming some kind of hierarchy, it proposes a horizontal view that considers *RDR* as expanding the scope

of the Western on an equal footing with the media that constitute its core – film and literature. To provide an example, a sense of vast spaces rife with impending dangers is an important feature of the Western genre. Whereas literature has rendered this space narratively, film has depicted it visually. Videogames added simulation, spatial navigation, and player action, but until several years into the new millennium, developers had to radically scale down the spatial and visual dimensions as well as more generally compromise in terms of both narrative density and audiovisual impact compared to their literary and cinematic ancestors. Although videogames like *Cheyenne*, released in 1984, managed to produce an engaging Western atmosphere and gave players the opportunity to reenact the genre's set pieces, especially shoot-outs, technological restraints in many ways left videogames in want of those qualities that endowed Westerns in other media with their timeless formidability. In previous videogames, the West was visually recognizable due to the genre's iconicity. As Wills writes, a "simple, pixilated version of the familiar cowboy was readily identifiable. Likewise, few could mistake a cactus, which was often all that was needed to signify a Western setting" (*Gamer* 73–74). Besides player action, however, they had little to offer that novels and films did not do better. *RDR* demonstrated how plot, visuals, spatial navigation, and ambient operations, newly enabled by the latest gaming technology, can work together to produce more than just another videogame drawing on the Western's iconography – a world that provides a genuinely new experience of the genre and its familiar markers (Buel 51–54; cf. Kirsten 240).

The open-world design, where players freely roam the gamespace, and the game mechanics shape *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds and, consequently, their functioning as interfaces to the Western genre. Except for the ability to move across the gamespace, none of the implemented mechanics are indispensable and none of those forgone are self-evidently expendable. Although it may seem like an obvious element to include, for instance, nothing prescribes that the player of a Western videogame must have the ability to shoot guns. While revolvers and rifles are undoubtedly omnipresent in the genre, not all Westerns are centered on gunfights and not all the genre's protagonists are gunfighters. A similar argument is easily made about gambling, drinking, bounty hunting, train robberies, and so on, all of which are common Western tropes that are, at the same time, not necessary to validate the genuineness of any one Western since no single trope has to be featured in each and every instance of the genre. Rockstar Games' imagination of the American West(ern) alone determines that *RDR* and *RDR2* are primarily shooters as well as gambling simulators. Both videogames could just as well be homesteading simulators centered on the hardships of farming and still work as Westerns. The same would be true for prospecting simulators and other Western tropes beyond outlaws and gunslingers. An open-world

design can easily support such scenarios. Even though non-violent actions, such as collecting herbs and greeting NPCs, are possible, and although some missions can be solved non-violently, the emergent gameplay during free roaming often tilts toward the necessary use of violence. Both *RDR* and *RDR2* feature farming activities in story missions, but they constitute only a small fraction of the gameplay experience (cf. Wright, "Rockstar" 7). *Red Dead Online*, the multiplayer mode of *RDR2* likewise offers some "specialist roles" that diverge from the stock revisionist cast, such as "naturalist," "trader," and "moonshiner," but are accompanied by the more familiar role of the "the bounty hunter" and overshadowed by the videogame's propensity for indiscriminate violence.

The inevitability of and fixation on violence results both from the inspiration drawn from revisionist Westerns and from the affordances of the messy open-world form. The way in which *Red Dead Redemption* appears to take delight in its representation of violence furthermore points to the revisionist rather than, for instance, the classic Western in which violence was also common but represented in a less obsessive manner. The limited array of possible player actions in combination with the likelihood of emergent and spectacular violence and the distinct depiction of the latter, then, significantly narrows down *Red Dead Redemption*'s representation of the Western genre, in line with select themes of the revisionist canon.

In this way, the gameworlds are cultural interfaces that privilege a specific – read: white, male, violent, and thus 'revisionist' – view of the Western while hampering access to alternative representations (Wright, *Rockstar* 117–120, Humphreys 207–213; cf. Byrd; cf. Hammar, "Producing" 149–151). This circumscription of an essential American genre goes beyond the main plots of *RDR* and *RDR2*, which remix established plot structures of the revisionist Western with familiar casts. More fundamental than these retellings, *Red Dead Redemption*'s narrow view of the Western is ingrained in the very operations of the gameworlds themselves, which promote a logic of Western life characteristic of a canon of select and critically acclaimed films but not the genre at large. That this kind of Western works, in the sense that it is recognizable and readable to its audience, shows that *Red Dead Redemption* treads in the footsteps of not only select Westerns of the past themselves but also of the practices of critics and scholars whose writings consolidated a discourse in which a small selection of so-called revisionist Westerns came to overshadow the actual variety of the genre from the 1960s onward (Nelson 7, 10, cf. 15–78).

This first of two major interface effects of the *Red Dead Redemption* series results in players of the videogames playing American by reenacting narratives and set pieces of the revisionist Western – which are examined more closely in the next section – in a gameworld marked by gratuitous violence and ambiguous morality, both in scripted missions and during free roaming gameplay. This mani-

festation of playing American reproduces an understanding of the American West as arena of white, male struggle necessitating violence to resolve conflicts, offering "regeneration through violence" at times of crisis (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 5). This aspect, then, can be viewed as the continuation of a long-standing tradition of imagining the American West. In contrast, the second of *Red Dead Redemption*'s interface effects, discussed in the next subchapter, constitutes a break in the Western genre and foregrounds variation in the reproduction of American culture, defining the series' cultural work.

## 4.2 A Different Kind of Western: Database, the Logic of 'Selaction,' and the Gameworld as (Unworkable) Interface

Interfaces are found not only between but also within objects. Cultural texts work as interfaces to other realms, but they also contain further interfaces. This assertion is essential to understanding the cultural work of *Red Dead Redemption* in relation to the Western genre and twenty-first-century American culture. As the videogames (re)configure the Western in the form of a database, they function as interfaces to the genre, but they also contain the interface necessary to access the database's contents: the gameworld.

Connecting genre and database conceptually means understanding one by way of the other. When, in his influential study *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich asserts that the database is "the key form of cultural expression" in "the computer age," he essentially ties form to culture (218). His definition describes databases as "collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other" (218), insisting that "as a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list" (225). Importantly, and this is crucial for my analysis of *Red Dead Redemption* and how it complicates and expands the existing critical discourse on the series, Manovich's claims clearly set database as a form apart from the "cause-and-effect trajectory" of narrative, the cultural form that, according to his argument, preceded database as the dominant mode of expression in modernity (225, cf. 218). This is a central point in understanding works like the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames, which are based on the predominately narrative and visual genre of the Western, from a different perspective.

*Red Dead Redemption* fills its gameworlds with a legion of activities, many of which are represented by icons on the in-game maps. These activities essentially amount to an unordered list of items that can be selected at will, each leading to

different kinds of actions in the gameworld. Applying Manovich's ideas to the question of genre, then, one can posit that: When genre texts present themselves in database form, "they appear as collections of items on which the user can perform various operations" (Manovich 219). Arguably, every genre text can be considered a "collection of items" (Manovich 219) and is marked as belonging to a genre precisely by displaying a number of generic traits (cf. Derrida 63), and it is these traits which define the genre against others with differing conventional properties in the first place (cf. Jameson, *Political* 128). In other words, the characteristics of a genre are located in component parts which recur throughout a given set of works. As these individual parts recur repeatedly, again and again, in more subsequently published works, they also raise expectations in the sense that, once the genre is thus established, one expects this or that feature in a work that explicitly or implicitly signals that it belongs to a certain genre; conversely, and the fluid and performative nature of genre notwithstanding, one does not expect the same in works associated with a different genre. Examples of such generic traits include recurring motifs, images, narrative elements, characters, and many more. Regarding the Western, several elements come to mind, to only name a few: the cowboy, the duel, the game of poker, the prairie or desert, the train robbery, the expansion of the railroad, the conflict with a band of Native Americans, the saloon brawl, the gang of outlaws, the Civil War veteran, the stagecoach, the rustler, the frontier town, the long ride, etc.

While no individual work contains all of the elements that mark a genre, a genre text generally employs some of the genre's elements and accords them central importance in its expressive composition. Works of a particular genre both repeat and vary the structures that characterized their predecessors by constantly rearranging the same established elements in ever new ways; in this context, "individual texts become important in the ways that they might deviate from the formula" (Buel 49). This formula, whether in its established shape or renewed by some innovation, is a central concept for understanding how genre has traditionally worked since it emphasizes a sense of arrangement. While the elements of a genre, once established, are known, its particular configuration in a single work sustains an interest in the work even as most of its elements are known beforehand. The more important point here, however, is that each of the elements is in a particular, meaningful relationship to those adjacent to it. What I call *meaningful* in this context refers to the ways each of the elements signifies in and through its specific position in relation to the others, regardless of whether this comes in the form of a cause-and-effect relationship that produces a particular plot in a Western film, a composition aiming to accentuate individual elements in particular ways in a Western painting, or something else. From the point of view of the work, a specific and fixed configuration guides the meaning-

making process between work and audience each time; it can be static (such as in a painting or photograph) or it can be evolving in a linear fashion (such as in a film), but it generally remains fixed in the way it presents itself.

As different as Frederic Remington's paintings are from Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* in form and aesthetic experience, as different even as John Ford's classic Western films are from Clint Eastwood's revisionist ones, what connects all of them is that they rely on the stable relationship between their integral parts in producing an aesthetic effect for the spectator or reader based on their particular arrangement of elements. In other words, works of given genre come in a specific configuration, which is then interpreted individually by each viewer.

While all genre texts thus work as the "collections of items" mentioned by Manovich, few texts invite their audience to "perform various operations" on their individual parts (219). Most works assign a singular operation – mainly viewing or reading – to all of their elements, which are presented in a fixed configuration. The complexities of the process of genre formation notwithstanding, once a genre is established, each of the generic elements in a given work functions through its distinct position in relation to the others. A specific, fixed configuration guides the meaning-making process between the work and its audience, which is both aware of the existence of the genre and familiar with its conventions. The database form – Ed Folsom has even called database itself a genre – changes this dynamic insofar as it allows for more than one possible operation and requires users to select which parts of the work to interact with in the first place – and which to neglect or ignore altogether. Regardless of how many players would play either *Red Dead Redemption* title that way, it is perfectly possible to play *RDR* and *RDR2* without ever collecting a bounty, without ever playing poker in the saloon, even without ever completing much of the main story line, just as it is entirely legitimate to only go bounty hunting and do not much else, and so on. The options are plentiful, and the player is compelled to choose. Genre as database in *Red Dead Redemption* thus exhibits "the logic of all new media – selection from a menu of choices" (Manovich 126). One no longer encounters the text as one particular arrangement of elements but must instead select which elements are presented and which operations are performed. Each part produces meaning comparatively independent of the others, existing for its own sake rather than as a functional component of a superordinate structure, and each part can combine with other in myriad ways, leading to infinite possible compositions. Without rehashing at length the question of the potentially "*ergodic*" nature of videogames (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1), one can justifiably claim that, as in many videogames, one configures the text of a database Western as much as one interprets it, whereas in previous figurations of genre only the latter was true (cf. Eskelinen 38; cf. Aarseth 62–67). This dynamic, if not dialectic, relationship between

a selective – dare we say 'selactive'? – user and a diegetic world that registers the user's activity within and reacts to it, is one of the characteristics that principally distinguish the database Western from its precursors. As acts of selection are indeed central to the structural functioning of *RDR* and *RDR2*, they are decisive for the functioning and politics of the Western genre reconfigured in the form of the database.

*Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western ultimately rests on four pillars: the provision of a large and varied set of generic traits, an interface (the gameworld) which allows access to them, processes of selection, and instances of action in relation to the former. Experiencing the Western in *Red Dead Redemption* is all about the selection of set pieces of the genre from a range of options, presented in and made available by the gameworld, and performing pertinent actions on them. Recall Galloway's notion of videogames as "an *action-based* medium" (*Gaming* 3). According to him, "[w]ith video games, the work itself is material action. One *plays* a game. And the software *runs*. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move. Here the 'work' is not as solid or integral as in other media" (*Gaming* 2). In Galloway's account, action is what ensures videogames' existence beyond lines of code (*Gaming* 2) and data stored in "carrier media" (Starre). In ambioperative gameworlds such as the ones examined in this book, this logic of action is accompanied by one of selection akin to that described by Manovich as a staple of new media in general. The database Western, therefore, is marked by a logic of 'selaction' – a hybrid form of selection and action in which one works coterminously with the other. "In the older Westerns, men acted," George N. Fenin and William K. Everson write, "for better or for worse, wisely or stupidly, they acted" (42). In the database Western of *Red Dead Redemption*, players sel*act*: they select through acting, act by selecting, select to act, and act to select. And not just the player, the machine, too, is involved in similar ways, as I elaborate later.

Returning to the question of the interface, the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames not only function as interfaces to the Western genre as represented by the revisionist canon; their gameworlds also function as interfaces to the database of Western tropes indicated before. In this sense, the gameworld-as-interface is the decisive element in *Red Dead Redemption*'s rearranging of the Western genre as a database. The tropes implemented are simultaneously presented in and made available by the gameworld. The process of "the construction of an interface to a database" is in line with a general principle of new media (Manovich 226); particularly graphical user interfaces and their functions have always played a central role in videogames. Yet understanding the gameworld itself as an interface, especially open worlds like those in *Red Dead Redemption*, pushes the academic discourse on gameworlds beyond both formal discussions and representational

critique. Retaining both approaches but further accentuating an understanding of videogames that focuses on the significance and signification of operations (for instance, particular gameplay acts), enables new insights into the work of gameworlds in the production of meaning and cultural resonances. Contrary to previous kinds of Westerns, which presented audiences with a fixed composition of parts that worked the way it did because of the specific arrangement, the database Western allows for random access in which each element works on its own but is also rendered potentially dispensable. The database supplies the elements, but it does not order or rank them (Manovich 225). The gameworld serves as a spatial interface here: navigating the world enables players to interact at will with the tropes contained. Even the main story in each game is nothing but another element in the database, which may or may not be selected and thus enacted.

Consider the following example. Over the past century, the duel has become a staple of the popular Western imaginary, immediately recognizable to audiences as signifying the violence and self-administered justice of the mythic American West. Though they are now so readily comprehensible as something simply belonging to the world of the Western, many of the genre's iconic duels are, in fact, the culminations of longer, causally connected, chains of events. Owen Wister's *Virginian* has to fight Trampas because of the latter's escalating frustration and hate in the wake of years of being outplayed by the former; McKay has to face Buck in *The Big Country* because an ongoing feud escalates over a woman desired by both men; and *Once Upon a Time in the West*'s Harmonica confronts Frank over his many crimes, including the murder of Harmonica's brother.

In contrast, *Red Dead Redemption*'s duels are generally disconnected from such cause-and-effect narratives. While they appear in a few story missions and when caught cheating at poker, the duels that occur during free play generally lack any motivational grounding. This is especially true for *RDR*, where opponents often randomly confront the protagonist for no apparent reason, upon which the player may decline the duel or accept the challenge. If accepted, it turns into a ludic challenge requiring the player's quick reaction and precision in taking out the contender before the protagonist himself is shot. Though immediately understood as a ludic challenge, the duel in *Red Dead Redemption*, because of its randomness, makes little sense from a narrative point of view. Nothing builds up to the duels in *RDR*, for instance, they simply happen and that is it. The videogame presents the duel to the player but does not offer an explanation for it.

Unlike the more iconic duels of previous Westerns, then, *Red Dead Redemption*'s renditions of the standoff appear shallow and without consequence; and they remain without consequence since they are not tied to any kind of fixed organizing structure such as a plot. Even death, in a videogame in which one's ava-

tar respawns indefinitely, cannot induce the duel with meaning beyond the challenge itself. Reduced to nothing but an isolated gameplay element, the duel is stripped of any meaning beyond the ludic. A duel here is only a duel; it is but one item among and equal to many others in a database of easily recognized Western tropes. Their significance, rather, lies in the very fact that they can be selected at will. This selectability – which implies a negligibility – unsettles the trope's familiar contextual grounding. The duel as a Western trope undoubtedly always signifies itself, in the sense that it signals that the text at hand is, indeed, a Western and that its world functions by a set of rules innate to the genre; it does this, however, by way of its distinct position in the plot, to which it remains inseparably tied. *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western, in contrast, turns the duel into an empty signifier that points to nothing beyond its own confines as a trope.

Drawing on "Matthew Thomas Payne's work on post-9/11 military games," Murray contends that "all games are cultural palimpsests" (*On* 61, 60). Both Payne and Murray highlight the ways in which videogame representations always contain previous cultural writings and, hence, meanings which may not be visibly apparent even as they fundamentally undergird and structure the experience of playing a particular videogame. The figure of the palimpsest, which refers to a manuscript page that is reused after the original writing has been erased, draws attention to the residues of earlier cultural expressions that remain as new ones are written over them. These residues are central to the database Western in *Red Dead Redemption*. If one examines closely the Western tropes included in *Red Dead Redemption*'s Western database, it becomes apparent that they are, in fact, truncated versions of Western tropes. Even though the duels do not appear to be motivated by anything substantial, they neither seem odd or out of place. In fact, they firmly fit in and belong to the Wild West world of *Red Dead Redemption* and are likely immediately understood by players. These are the residues, as it were, on the palimpsest of the Western in *Red Dead Redemption*, and these narrative residues continuously ground the database Western within the larger generic formation of the Western and make it readable as such.

The game of poker, featured in both titles as a mini game, displays the points delineated above just as visibly. When Wister's eponymous hero in *The Virginian*, the novel that popularized the cowboy figure as it is known today, asks, "[a]ny cyards going to-night?" its narrative function is to set up a confrontation with his antagonist Trampas during the game that follows (15). In Westerns, playing cards often serves the atmosphere, but when the central characters get involved, the game usually takes on a specific plot function. Its purpose may be expository, with the characters' conversation providing the audience with relevant information, or accelerative, propelling the plot forward by launching a conflict calling for (violent) resolution; but involving major characters in the game of cards is

seldom an end in itself. In *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western, this is different. While both *RDR* and *RDR2* feature story missions involving poker, both videogames also enable players to join poker tables across the gameworlds at their own convenience. Unlike those in linear Western plots, however, these optional games are purely ludic challenges without motivation or consequence; the activity is ultimately irrelevant beyond the act of playing virtual poker for its own sake. Like the duel, the trope of the game of poker is deprived of its significance and reduced to an instance of postmodern "pastiche" executable at will by the player (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 17).

The same is true for the visual appearance of *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds. The iconography of representing the frontier, and ultimately the American West, has its roots in Romantic landscape painting (especially by Albert Bierstadt and other members of the so-called Hudson River School), became condensed and conventionalized in Frederic Remington's iconic portrayal of the cowboy West, and was popularized and perpetuated in the age of classic Western film, particularly John Ford's shots of Monument Valley. All of these, in turn, inform the visual styles of *Red Dead Redemption*, especially in terms of lighting and color palette (cf. Gies; cf. Goldberg). So *RDR2*'s vast and varied stretches of unsettled land with their thriving flora and fauna, for instance, are perhaps not quite the potentially ecocritical, empathy-inducing "pastoral awareness spaces" identified by Zimmermann ("Ethical" 64). Instead, they are yet another set of connecting factors between the player's conception of American landscapes, informed by previous media representations, and Rockstar Games' own vision of the West(ern), which, in turn, is also shaped by its visual predecessors in different media. *Red Dead Redemption* arguably invites players to seek out locations and situations in which they visually (re)create scenes reminiscent of the videogames' visual inspirations, even recreating the atmosphere of those kinds of images and implicating players in the politics of landscape art (cf. Mitchell, cf. Murray, *On* 144, 167–168, 180). Even here, then, the database logic of selection is fully in play. What matters is the process of selection and the interface that facilitates it, both of which alter the configuration of the Western genre in the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames.

*Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds, then, appear as interfaces that facilitate random access to playable renditions of common Western tropes. The gameworld is the interface of/to the database Western as it makes these tropes available for interaction. The central player action is selection, expressed through navigation of the gameworld. This goes beyond ordinary choices within a gamic system and instead foregrounds a process of selection one level above individual gameplay choices: the selection of which forms of gameplay, which structural scaffolds for gamic action, are presented in the first place. No element in this database is man-

datory or more important than the others, not even the story missions. Many players evidently indulge in *Red Dead Redemption*'s revisionist Western plots, which have met generally positive reactions from critics, and play them to completion; but they do this because they choose to, not because the videogames dictate it. It is a choice made possible by the database structure that also implies that one may choose not to pursue the continuation of the plot. Within the confines of how Rockstar Games envisions the genre, *RDR* and *RDR2* are the Westerns players want them to be, with *Red Dead Online* representing perhaps the purest example for this logic since its plots remain rudimentary and incidental, while its menu of choices surpasses those of *RDR* and *RDR2*'s singleplayer modes. In either case, the relationships between the selected elements remain fluid and without permanent hierarchies.

This does not mean, however, that these relationships are arbitrary or random. An important aspect of the database Western as open-world videogame is the often seamless transition from one element to another in a way that upholds the impression of an integrated, if incomplete, world – a dynamic system without any ruptures. Whereas in linear Westerns one element organically leads to a single other specific element, most items in the database Western can proceed from several antecedents and different subsequent elements can ensue from them. Nonetheless, these provisional connections frequently still follow generic precedents.

The previously discussed poker game and duel provide a pertinent example. The only way for players to initiate a duel themselves is by cheating at poker. This immediately conjures the trope of the hustling cheat, instantly confronted by opponents. More importantly, it illustrates the player's operation of the interface and its inherent logic of selection within the database Western. To be able to play a duel at will, players have to navigate the gameworld, seek out a game of poker, and cheat – and to be able to cheat, they first need to acquire an "Elegant Suit" for the protagonist. In other words, players select to enact the trope of the duel by moving through the aforementioned steps in the gameworld-as-interface, which functions almost like a menu (cf. Simond and Lehnert; cf. Manovich 126).

The notion of the menu also demands consideration of another interface within *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds, an "*intraface*" (Galloway, *Interface* 40), if you will: the various icons and menus superimposed over the gameworld. While these elements enable players to act in the gameworld in particular ways, they are not of the gameworld. The mini map with its icons signifying possible gameplay activities; the conversation menus calling for player choices concerning forking lines of action; the "Dead Eye" mechanic, which slows down time so that players can literally mark opponents to be shot accurately and instantly once the passing of time returns to normal: these all blur the line between the diegetic and the nondiegetic (cf. Galloway, Gaming 1–38). They signify aspects of the diegesis

and are partly interacted with in the gameworld, but they are imperceptible for in-game characters, as it were; they only exist in the player's perspective. Consider Galloway's assertion that "[t]he intraface is within the aesthetic. It is not a window or doorway separating the space that spans from here to there. Gérard Genette, in his book *Thresholds*, calls it a '"zone of indecision" between the inside and outside.' . . . The intraface is *indecisive* for it must always juggle two things (the edge and the center) at the same time" (*Interface* 40–41). This mediation between "the edge and the center" is a central interface effect of *RDR* and *RDR2*'s gameworlds, and it is important for the videogames' interrelation with the Western genre. The center in *Red Dead Redemption* is the diegetic dimension of the gameworld while the edge is comprised by the visual overlays constituting the intraface. The latter facilitate player action within the diegesis at the same time as they make visible the informatic nature of the videogame (Galloway, *Interface* 33). The computational "mode of mediation" (Galloway, *Interface* 18), therefore, defines the database Western with its interface effects and sets it apart from preceding forms.

Although *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds work almost like a menu, they are nonetheless fundamentally different from the menus commonly encountered. In a menu, users act through selection and are the only operators of that interface. The interface of the computer menu works without interruptions, occasional technical breakdowns notwithstanding. Navigating the gameworlds of *Red Dead Redemption* to access one's desired Western tropes is not quite as smooth. It requires work – or "nontrivial effort" (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1)– to select the duel by way of cheating at poker. Players must acquire specific clothes for the protagonist, seek out an establishment where poker is played, buy in, and cheat, all of which necessitates overcoming various obstacles with varying degrees of effort and which is further complicated by the gameworlds' ambient operations.

The most prominent kind of ambient operation in *RDR* and *RDR2* is the random event, not least because it draws attention to the interface. Random events can take many forms – most of those in *RDR* and *RDR2* are precisely the kind of Western tropes mentioned before, including duels, damsels in distress, outlaw ambushes, and many more – but the procedure is always the same: a blinking dot appears on the mini map, indicating an event in the player's vicinity. Players are also audibly alerted – for example, by a cry for help – so that their attention is momentarily (re)directed toward the event. Take the damsel in distress as an example. Upon moving through the gameworld in either *RDR* or *RDR2* players will occasionally hear the voice of a stranger nearby calling for help, finding her stranded far away from any settlement. Maybe her carriage has broken down, maybe she was robbed – in any case, she needs the protagonist's help and asks to be escorted. From a narrative point of view, nothing about this is motivated by

either the plot or the player's actions in the gameworld. The player's reaction, likewise, is largely without major consequences. The protagonist's reputation in the gameworld may be affected slightly, but really it does not matter whether the player plays along or ignores the occurrence. In database terms, to disregard the event is to not perform an operation on this particular item, nothing more.

Random events both exemplify the database logic and complicate the question of the interface. They are prime examples of both the database structure and the principle of random access that distinguishes the database Western from earlier forms of the genre; by definition, random events rely on random access. Yet these events are random only from the player's perspective. The randomness of the event lies entirely in the unpredictable occurrence of the event as perceived by players, the crucial point being that it is the computer who accesses the database in these moments. *Red Dead Redemption*'s random events are literally "machine actions," more precisely "*diegetic machine acts*" (Galloway, Gaming 5, 12). From the system's perspective, there is no randomness in their execution since they are at all times algorithmically determined.

The event's occurrence is tied to specific parameters related to players' present activity, which, if meeting set criteria, triggers a seemingly random event appropriate to the player character's current circumstance – appropriate because some events make sense in certain contexts but not in others. Importantly, random events never seem out of place; they always fit in with and organically emerge from the environment. The random event, then, is the epitome of an ambient operation as a part of the ambience act described by Galloway. Random events not only fit in because they appear to emerge from the environment; they, in turn, also contribute to the atmosphere of the gameworld by making the environment appear integrated, active, and responsive. This moment when the random event occurs and captures the player's attention is the juncture at which the database logic underlying the database Western in *Red Dead Redemption* becomes visible and demands action.

The database logic works in two ways here. First, the videogame itself selects, as it were, one event from a set of all possible events. No event is more important than any other, and the occurrence of an event never depends on the occurrence of another before or after it. This part of the database itself is hidden to the player; there is no immediate way of seeing all possible events or even influencing their occurrence. It is confined to the machinic level and operated solely by the program, which chooses based on specific conditions of the gameworld. Yet the player does engage the database logic from the other side. Every time a random event occurs, the player must choose how to act in relation to the event. Ignore it? Engage it? If so, in which way? Follow the suggested script and play along? Simply shoot everyone, thus ending the event? The options are plentiful.

One can dissect this moment even further. In the first instance, it is guided by the logic of selection. The system not only selects an event to occur in the player's environment, the player also selects their action in response to it. No event is more important than the others and no player reaction is more appropriate than any other. Any way in which this moment plays out is as significant and meaningful as any other for two reasons. First, none of it is mandatory. Unlike the story missions in *RDR* and *RDR2* – which, as described earlier, have to be actively sought out and triggered by the player in yet another instance of database logic – random events do not need to occur. Most players will never witness all possible random events. The second reason is that the way ambient operations are organically embedded in the gameworld, in the sense that they always make sense, also entails that any kind of engagement with them also equally makes sense. This is because all options of engagement that the videogame affords are likewise designed in line with the world in which they occur. *RDR* and *RDR2* revolve around outlaws in the Wild West, inspired by revisionist Westerns, so that the possibilities for interaction with other characters privilege the acts of shooting, capturing, and robbing while providing only limited opportunities for verbal communication. If a damsel in distress calls for the protagonist's help because she is being robbed, it makes just as much sense, in terms of the videogame, to help her by apprehending or killing the bandit as it does to rob her oneself. Each option is afforded by the videogame and its database structure, and each option is similarly significant. As every option is meaningful on its own rather than as part of a larger whole, however, the whole gets drained of significance. When it does not really matter what comes before or after, which choice is made, and which action taken or not, and when an algorithm randomly stages events in the gameworld, the genre text itself is randomized; this, as we shall see, is crucial for *Red Dead Redemption*'s politics.

While such ambient operations are essential to produce the dense Western atmosphere *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds have been lauded for, they also demand another look at the interface. The machine act of the random event has two important implications. First, it demonstrates that the distinction between the interface and whatever it serves as an interface to "is purely artificial" (Galloway, *Interface* 33). In other words, "there is no *essential* difference between" interface and database in *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western (Galloway, *Interface* 33); both reside in the gameworld. The gameworld is both database and interface, and it is the screen onto which each selected item is projected. *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworld-as-interface is both the effect of players' actions in the gameworld and the process that translates parts of the gameworld into accessible items of the database and vice versa. Second, these diegetic machine acts regularly interfere with player action and therefore hamper players' use of the database. The gameworld,

then, "is an interface that is unstable. It is . . . unworkable" (Galloway, *Interface* 39), rather than guaranteeing frictionless interactions with the database. Despite its apparent coherence, where every unit operation appears perfectly integrated, the world of *Red Dead Redemption* ultimately denies any stable relationship between the database, its contents, and the user, which has implications for its relationship to the Western genre.

Having now delineated the essential features of the database Western, the question may arise whether HBO's *Westworld*, a serial TV adaption of Michael Crichton's 1973 film of the same title, does not similarly display those features, as it centers on a Western theme park populated by androids in which visitors can live through their very own Western fantasies. Although *Red Dead Redemption* is sometimes compared to *Westworld* (cf. MacDonald), the latter, as a linear serial TV format, and despite its frequent employment of ludo-narrative tropes (Kanzler 57–69), does not constitute a database Western as defined here. The eponymous theme park in the series, with its elaborated simulation of a Western world, on the other hand, arguably displays some features of the database Western. It is, however, entirely fictional, which means that no real-world user can access it. *Westworld*'s Westworld, as it were, is an imagined database Western, then. *Red Dead Redemption*, in contrast, is real all around, engaged by real people and exerting real cultural agency.

This cultural agency manifests itself in the phenomenon of playing American, which in the database Western is playing with the Western by selecting and subsequently enacting Western tropes at the player's and the machine's will, resulting in a Western assembled cooperatively by the player and the algorithms running the gameworld. This reproduces American culture by altering the user's relationship to the Western, one of the central American genres, which is destabilized in the process, thus shifting the politics of the Western in particular ways, as I elaborate in this chapter's conclusion. Before that, one last aspect of *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western demands consideration: the videogames' development and its implication in global capitalist practices.

## 4.3 Cowboys and Indians: The Transnational American West and the Production Side of the Database Western

In his book on *The Rhizomatic West*, a term borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Neil Campbell writes:

> To examine the West in the twenty-first century is to think of it as always already transnational, a more routed and complex rendition, a traveling concept whose meanings move be-

> tween cultures, crossing, bridging, and intruding simultaneously. Rather than the assumption that "roots always precede routes" in the definition of culture, one might rethink "any local, national, or regional domain," such as the West, as an interactive process of constitutive contacts and mobilities. (4)

Just as the American West in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a transnational (media) product, as Campbell rightly points out, so are many contemporary AAA videogames the product of development teams spread across different countries around the globe. I argue that one has to understand both of these phenomena, the transnational imagination of the American West and the AAA videogame industry, together in order to grasp the politics of the database Western and the effects of playing American, particularly as presented by *RDR2*. Whereas the American West as an idea – and likewise the Western as a genre – may have been an American invention originally, it has long since travelled around the globe. And, as Campbell reminds his readers, not only that: the American West, as "a traveling or mobile discourse" has also for a long time been produced in various guises elsewhere around the world (*Rhizomatic* 1). One of the most important manifestations of this, and also the most relevant for this chapter, is arguably the so-called Spaghetti Western, especially the films directed by Sergio Leone. Hence, a major reference point to approach *Red Dead Redemption* generally and *RDR2* specifically throughout this subchapter is Leone's masterpiece *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

As I demonstrated using the example of *Grand Theft Auto*, the production of American culture cannot be reduced to origins in the US American nation state. Furthermore, Rockstar Games and its products are informed both by the Housers' and *Grand Theft Auto*'s British background – and, hence, by their outsider perspective as well as popular culture-inflected idea of America – and by the fact that it has grown into a globally operating company with ten studios distributed over three continents. The America at stake here is one that is imagined and produced truly transnationally, beyond geographical borders and across cultures. Likewise, the videogames studied in this book are transnational products resulting from the concerted efforts of development teams based in different countries and comprised of workers of different nationalities; *GTA V* and *RDR2* stand out especially here since all of Rockstar's studios were involved in their production at least temporarily, many throughout the entire process ("Development of *Grand*"; "Development of *Red*").

Returning to the Western, particularly when understood in its broader sense of any kind of work that depicts or makes a statement about the region of the American West beyond the cowboy Western formula, it is hard to disagree with Campbell's contention that "the West is performed and practiced outside its geographical and ideological boundaries (or grids)" (*Rhizomatic* 113). The region has,

for a long time, been one that has sparked the imagination of artists and ordinary people alike around the world. Karl May and Sergio Leone are world-famous, but there are countless others who are perhaps less known outside of the country of their nationality but who have performed similar roles in their respective cultures. Campbell's conceptualization of the American West as "a traveling or mobile discourse" is important here because it suggests that while 'the West' may have originated in the United States (*Rhizomatic* 1), it has not only moved to other countries but also circulates and possibly also flows back, in new guises, to where it came from. Although the American West "is sedimented in historiography through the Turner thesis, the art of Bierstadt and Russell, the western novels of Wister or Grey, the western films of John Ford, the photographic epics of Ansel Adams, the fashion iconography of Ralph Lauren, and the advertising of Marlboro, all constructing interrelated aspects of a westward creation story" (N. Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 2), this list of mediators is complemented by an easily forgotten body of non-American doubles and counterparts which similarly produce and circulate ideas and images of the American West. In other words, the production and dissemination of the American West is not a one-way affair of American-produced works broadcasting ideas about a mythic locale to the rest of the world, but rather an ongoing, mutual, and transnational exchange that is constantly in flux.

As indicated before, the example that possibly outshines all others in this respect is Sergio Leone's decidedly transnational adaptation of the cinematic Western (cf. N. Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 141), which is why it serves as the point of entry for a discussion of *Red Dead Redemption*'s relation to the transnational American West. Leone himself once exclaimed that "[i]t is a great shame if 'America' is always to be left to the Americans" (qtd. in N. Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 149), as his films worked to reimagine the American West from the outside, ultimately producing "a critical dialogue asking questions about the West as history and representation" (N. Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 149). Whether the *Red Dead Redemption* series can truly call itself an heir to *Once Upon a Time in the West* or the *Dollars* trilogy, comprising *A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, may be contested, and justifiably so, but the more interesting lineage between Rockstar Games' work and that of Leone can be found in the similarities between their transnational production.

Since this is a book about videogames and a chapter about a particular series, I do not want to delve too deep into the specifics of Leone's appropriation, adaptation, and remodeling of the Western, nor do I think it is necessary to discuss the aesthetics of his cinema at great length here. What matters in its relation to *Red Dead Redemption* is more generally how Leone approached the most American of American genres from a decidedly European perspective and how his approach

ultimately resulted in a product neither truly European nor American, but genuinely transnational. Shot mostly in Italy and Spain, the look and feel of *Once Upon a Time in the West* is exemplary for "the American West Leone created," which, as Campbell explains, was

> a European version that looked authentic but, at the same time, had a particular quality of light, filmed in a unique manner to emphasize its stark, isolated beauty. The uncanny, disorienting experience of these places [the locations and scenery where Leone shot his films], even today, mirrors the effects of spaghetti Westerns – both familiar and unfamiliar, strangely unsettling, "more Western than Westerns themselves." (*Rhizomatic* 114)

This effect of creating an experience "more Western than Westerns themselves" is made possible precisely because Leone, his team, and the production of his films where largely detached geographically and culturally from the American West and its ideological charge. Hence, he was free to draw from, remix, and reaccentuate elements of the American Western film according to his own vision of the American West and in ways unseen in American productions before.

To return to the question of the transnational quality of Leone's Western cinema in the concrete manifestations of its production, it is interesting how, in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the transnational quality of the film seeps through from its casting to the diegesis:

> Politically, the effect of using different nationalities in the cast, for example, is crucial to the film, giving it an immediate multicultural impact, yet Leone goes further by deliberately miscasting actors whose ethnicity conflicts with their role. Most notably, Italians Gabrielle Ferzetti and Claudia Cardinale play Anglo-Saxons (Morton, the diseased capitalist, and Jill McBain, a New Orleans prostitute turned wife), while Italian Marco Zuanelli plays a Chinaman called Wobbles, Charles Bronson (Polish American) plays a half-breed Native American named Harmonica, and Jason Robards (white American) plays a Mexican bandit with an Native American name, Cheyenne! This determined playfulness with audience expectations and genre conventions is typical of Leone's approach throughout the film and acts to question our assumptions about the Western (and by implication about the West) by deliberately going against the grain, jumbling ethnicities to demonstrate the actual (but often hidden) multiculturalism of the West, while also asking us to question its traditional ethnic and gender stereotypes as portrayed by Hollywood. How significant is it, for example, that Woody Strode, an African American, is one of the first characters we see in the film? (*Rhizomatic* 141)

Leone thus employs actors of different nationalities and ethnicities, but frequently casts them in roles not aligned with their own backgrounds; at the same time, like some of the American revisionist Westerns that succeeded *Once Upon a Time in the West*, he reveals a certain, albeit still somewhat timid, sense of multiculturalism in the American West which had often been absent from earlier representations. This kind of international collaboration in producing a transnational version of the

American West makes Leone's work particularly relevant to understanding the cultural work performed by the *Red Dead Redemption* series in similar respects.

Though they have since emigrated to the United States, the two most influential people at Rockstar Games, brothers Sam and Dan Houser, originally hail from the United Kingdom, providing them with the same kind of outside perspective Leone brought to the Western, which has repeatedly been pointed out in discussions of the *Grand Theft Auto* series, as mentioned already in chapter 2 (cf. Miller, "Jacking" 409; cf. Murray, "High Art" 91). As such, their vision of America has, from the beginning, been filtered through American popular culture, especially Hollywood cinema. Especially since *GTA III* and the move to three-dimensional graphics, the Housers have repeatedly shown their ambition to produce interactive versions of the kinds of films they love with Rockstar Games' videogames. Whereas for *RDR*, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* has been identified as the principal inspiration (Buel 54), the case is less clear for *RDR2*, even as the prequel's central plot anchor, Dutch van der Linde's gang, still reminds one of Peckinpah's classic and other revisionist Westerns like it. Besides the Western genre, however, Dan Houser, the leading senior creative in the development of *RDR2*'s plot and characters, revealed in an interview that he heavily looked to nineteenth-century literature, especially British novels, for inspiration:

> "It's more like Thackeray than Hemingway, at least in terms of scale," with "an array of freaks, weirdos and needy people and exciting people" for variety.
>
> Dan says for research he consumed "hundreds" of books and films, "but nothing contemporary. I don't want to be accused of stealing ideas." He mentions Dickens, Henry James, Keats, Émile Zola, and "Arthur Conan Doyle, who just has great sections about America, you know, like a brilliant thing about union disputes in Pennsylvania and a brilliant thing about Mormons in Utah. But there's no greater character in the history of literature than [*David Copperfield*'s] Uriah Heep," he says. (Goldberg)

It is apparent that, at least as far as Dan Houser is concerned, Rockstar Games' first priority is creating a world that appears believable with regard to the late nineteenth century, the historical era *RDR2* tries to resemble. Remarkably, however, the (American) Western appears to disappear, at least in Houser's account, as a principal model for the world of *RDR2*, even as the product still thoroughly draws on the genre. Moreover, Houser predominately lists European novelists from the nineteenth century; there is Henry James, but no mention of other American realist or naturalist writers like William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, or Theodore Dreiser, to name just a few. As mentioned before, this indicates a certain kind of European filter laid over the Western gameworld of *Red Dead Redemption*, similar both to the visions of *Grand Theft Auto*'s America and, concerning the Western, Leone's Spaghetti Western. Nonetheless, as chapter 2 demonstrated for the example of *Grand Theft Auto*, this does by no means take away from *Red Dead Redemption*'s

participation in and reproduction and signification of American culture. "This being the same refrain sung throughout the book," to borrow a phrase from Galloway (*Interface* 36): American culture is reproduced transnationally, and the videogames studied here are prime examples of this process.

Related to this principle and the case of *Red Dead Redemption*, two aspects in particular deserve special attention. One concerns the aesthetic differences between Leone's transnational take on the Western and that of Rockstar Games, which explains the vastly disparate politics of their Westerns. The other zooms in on the material conditions of the production of Rockstar Games' most recent release *RDR2*, which not only stands exemplarily for much more widespread practices in the videogame industry and how they enable a form like the database Western in the first place, but which are also inseparable from the politics of the videogames studied in this book (as well as other contemporary AAA releases).

First, it seems fruitful to compare Leone's method with that of Rockstar Games. The iconic Italian director's approach to the Western genre centered on selecting recognizable elements of the American Western and arranging them in new ways, which generally is not unlike what one finds in *Red Dead Redemption*'s recipe. Leone gave the Western formula a new order and its components new shapes, "mobilizing the genre from within its own defining characteristics and stereotypes so that its fixed codes are carefully turned around upon themselves, interrogated, and ultimately reimagined" (N. Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 141), ultimately resulting, with *Once Upon a Time in the West*, in "the first truly postmodernist movie, made by a cinéaste for cinéastes" (Frayling, *Sergio* 266). The elements themselves remained recognizable even as they differed, but the whole they composed amounted to something disparate from the American Western. As Leone himself described it, "[t]he basic idea" in the case of *Once Upon a Time in the West* "was to use some of the conventions, devices and settings of the American Western film, and a series of references to individual Westerns – to use these things to tell *my* version of the story of the birth of a nation" (qtd. in Frayling, *Sergio* 252). Each reference here serves a distinct purpose in creating "that feeling throughout of a kaleidoscopic view of all American Westerns put together" but without "making it sound like citations for citations' sake" (Leone qtd. in Frayling, *Sergio* 256). In this way, Leone's Westerns formed singular, carefully crafted arrangements in which each element related to the others in a specific way, which is particularly true of *Once Upon a Time in the West*:

> Each of the main characters in the story 'moves' like a chesspiece, the chessboard being, in William Burroughs' phrase, "the mythological system, that is, the cycle of conditioned action". It is the ways in which Leone presents these 'moves', describes the "cycle of conditioned action", and explores the implications of each 'move' for the other important 'pieces', that constitute the main interest of *Once Upon a Time*." (Frayling, *Spaghetti* 194)

As Frayling points out here, each part of the narrative, and the film generally, functions in a specific relation to all the others, which is where, as I show in a moment, the similarities with *Red Dead Redemption* end and where the videogames produce a politics radically different from Leone's. Some of the ways in which Neil Campbell describes Leone's work could just as well be ascribed to Rockstar's Western videogames, while other aspects defining the former appear to be missing in the latter. Consider, for example, this assessment:

> Leone knew only too well that the Western's images could not "signify themselves," for they had been exhausted through overuse and were taken for granted by their audience to the point that the genre had grown stale and repetitive in Hollywood terms . . . . [H]is answer was to revel in the clichés and the mythic architecture of an exhausted, familiar genre, simultaneously defamiliarizing them through the acts of abstraction and spectacle Wenders recognized as like the tourist experience. As we watch the film, we "index" and "drag," "cut" and "paste" from our collective cinematic unconscious of Westerns in the same way that post-tourists engage with their "destinations," creating a multiple and complex set of responses and opinions, both creative and critical, iconic and ironic." (N. Campbell, *Rhizomatic* 137)

Remarkably, the terms Neil Campbell uses to describe the experience of watching a film like *Once Upon a Time in the West* hail from a register usually associated with computer applications, particularly those structured as databases (cf. Manovich 218–243). The acts of indexing, dragging, cutting and pasting work figuratively in Campbell's description of Leone's work, but for databases – and, hence, the database Western – these and similar acts constitute their principal functions. This difference, I contend, accounts for the diverging politics of two approaches to the Western which, on the surface level, appear to have much in common.

The difference between the figurative and the actual is crucial here because it points to the different modes of engagement in Leone's Western's and *Red Dead Redemption*, which ultimately inflect their diverging politics. While Campbell may be right in suggesting that viewers make sense of Leone's films by referring to and utilizing the "repertoire" of the Western genre (Iser 114–120) – not unlike a database, in a way – each of these films is still a static arrangement of elements in which each element is in a fixed position to all the others and, in an ordinary viewing, is experienced in a particular order. The acts Campbell refers to take place in the viewer not the work, the latter of which is not configured through these acts on a material level. In other words, these are acts of interpretation which are prompted by the carefully crafted arrangement of the film itself; that is, viewers of *Once Upon a Time in the West* cut and paste from their experience of the Western genre because the film is composed in a way that provokes this kind of reception and interpretation. As such, the film produces an effect that quite explicitly invites viewers to reconsider their own expectations and assumptions, and thus it also produces a re-

visionary politics more radical than that of the American revisionist Western, which defamiliarizes the genre to an extent that exposes its violence and the violence of the history it purports to depict. Drawing on Deleuze, Campbell writes that "Leone's work is 'a cinema of 'effects' rather than meanings, of playful excess rather than classical expressivity'" (*Rhizomatic* 138), and while this may be true in general, its effects certainly produce distinct meanings and, as such, are decidedly and unequivocally expressive – expressive of specific ideas, which stand in opposition to the American Western and everything it stands for.

In *Red Dead Redemption*, the acts described above are not figurative but real. Since these videogames are structured as databases, the principal way of engaging with them is through searching, selecting, discarding, etc., the items they include. Granted, the player's interpretation of any one element may still follow a similar process as interpreting a scene in a Leone Western. The interaction, however, is first and foremost a decontextualized one. *Red Dead Redemption* also rearranges elements of the Western genre, but it does not require its players to experience its elements in any particular order or even in their full extent, quite the contrary. Whereas a scene in Leone's Western signifies both through its relation to the trope it draws on and through its position in relation to the other scenes before and after – to the narrative whole, in other words – in the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames, players are left with only the trope since "the database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list" (Manovich 225). In the database Western, random access is the name of the game and this produces a particular meaning, and hence politics, one quite different from Leone's. Leone takes tropes and clichés out of context to rearrange them and create a new vision of the Western by remixing its elements in a specific way, which draws attention to the exhaustion of the genre at the time and lays bare some of the dead ends of the American Western imagination; this approach is deeply historical in the sense that it is acutely aware of both the history of the Western and the history of the American West, as well as the relationship between the two. *Red Dead Redemption*, in contrast, isolates and formalizes generic tropes to make them available for random access, which not only decontextualizes them but also severs them from (their) history. Foregrounding selection and reconfiguration seemingly uncoupled from deterministic cause-and-effect relationships suggests a more fluid, open approach to the Western, one that appears to evade the politics of its analog forebears, or even politics altogether, by divesting from historical linkages. The mere process of purging a genre that has always had political reverberations of this very history is, of course, political in its own right, a point further expanded in this chapter's conclusion.

Returning to the question of the transnational reproduction of the American West in the Western for a last time, one has to consider how, similar to Leone's

Westerns, *Red Dead Redemption* is a thoroughly transnational work. *RDR2*, in particular, is a videogame which "unlike previous ones, hasn't been made by a single Rockstar studio but all of them, functioning as a single team, working constantly, for the best part of a decade," according to *IGN*'s Daniel Krupa. "Since work began on the project, Rockstar has gradually consolidated all of its studios into a single team spanning the globe. So whereas previously it shipped games made by Rockstar North or Rockstar San Diego, *Red Dead 2* will be presented as a Rockstar Games Production. A global effort" (Krupa). That is no less than ten active studios on three continents working together in order to produce a single videogame, something which, even in a blown-up AAA videogame industry, constitutes an extraordinary scale. "The resulting game," writes the *Guardian*'s Keza MacDonald, "is the result of more than 1,600 people's labour over seven years and will have cost hundreds of millions of pounds – enough to bankrupt almost any other developer." While these statistics and the efforts to place them into relation to previous and still common practices in the industry may appear as inconspicuous numbers at first glance, they are in fact at the center of another factor of *Red Dead Redemption*'s playing American and its ensuing cultural work, one related to conditions of production in the contemporary AAA videogame industry in an age of late neoliberal capitalism, as I explain in the following pages.

First, a short anecdote. When I finally completed *RDR2*'s main story after approximately 100 hours of playing – I did spend quite some time on optional side activities – and the credits began to roll, I decided to watch them in their entirety, possibly for the first time ever, which turned out to be around forty minutes of watching since the credits are interspersed with several cutscenes depicting events taking place after the end of *RDR2*'s central plot. I had just put in an enormous amount of time into a videogame I sincerely enjoyed for several reasons, after all, so I thought it was only fair to also watch the credits. After a few minutes, I noticed something I had not anticipated: quite a considerable number of the people involved in the game's development had Indian names. Though these Indian names, as I realized after re-watching *RDR2*'s credits, were not in fact as numerable as they appeared at first sight, there were indeed entire teams composed almost exclusively of Indians. These, I soon learned, were part of Rockstar India, Rockstar Games' most recent addition to its lineup of studios, which was set up in Bangalore in 2016.

This subchapter began by pointing to *Red Dead Redemption*'s treading in the footsteps of a tradition of imagining the American West not only out outside of the United States but indeed transnationally, which is the general lineage to which the series is indebted. The anecdote related above, however, leads to a path from the general transnational nature of the Western to the particular globalized organiza-

tion of leading AAA videogame publishers, specifically concerning the conditions of production and the question of who is providing (parts of) the labor.

As is typical for the AAA videogame industry and its flagship franchises, Rockstar Games relies on an international workforce working in specialized teams in their numerous studios in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and India, as well as international subcontractors, in the case of *RDR2* predominately hailing from China, India, and Serbia. While Asia has long had a strong videogame industry, particularly in Japan and, to a lesser extent, South Korea, North American and European publishers have relied on Asian labor in manufacturing both hardware and videogames for decades (cf. Dyer Witheford and de Peuter 50, 64; cf. Woodcock 35–36), a trend that mirrors similar developments in the tech industry at large. A decade ago, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter wrote:

> The huge fixed investment represented by EA and other big publishers in places like Vancouver, Montreal, and California will probably ensure that in the near to mid-future, much of the high-concept game development remains at these locations, even if formulaic components are increasingly outsourced. In the longer term, the cognitariat of game development will have to wage its fight for survivable working hours across a global battlefield. (65)

This poignant assessment, plausible when published in 2009 and proven in the meantime, is relevant to my discussion of *Red Dead Redemption* and the politics of the database Western for two reasons. First, the outsourcing and offshoring of "formulaic components" has become integral to the development process, at least in Rockstar Games' case. Second, the last sentence quoted here points toward the issue of working conditions, particularly in a fully globalized industry and market such as videogaming. Both factors are addressed in the following, specifically concerning the example of *RDR2*'s development.

Regarding the aspect of offshoring videogame development work to Asia, in Rockstar's case especially India and to some extent China, the first question that needs to be addressed is: which kinds of tasks are outsourced to these countries? While it is difficult to get reliable facts on such inside information in an industry that is rather secretive of its inner workings, two points can serve as indicators: the establishment of Rockstar India as a studio officially operating under the Rockstar brand and the team designations in *RDR2*'s credits. Rockstar India was founded in 2016, which means that it entered the development process of *RDR2* comparatively late. This is also the year the game was officially announced, which means that, given Rockstar's hesitant approach to revealing information on new videogames before they reach a rather advanced state, work on *RDR2* must have begun considerably earlier, likely in 2011, a year after its predecessor was released. This implies, then, that the development of *RDR2* had long out-

grown its conceptual stage and entered the phase concerned with realizing the vision behind the videogame and making it work on a technical level when Rockstar India was established, likely to immediately join forces on producing Rockstar Games' latest blockbuster. Concerning which kind of work Rockstar India was providing specifically, one can infer from the captions in *RDR2*'s credits that it was mostly animation work since the vast majority of Indian names as well as the explicit reference to Rockstar India as a distinct studio appear under the labels of "Ambient World Animation," "Cinematic Animation," and other forms of animation. Similarly, the Chinese, Indian, and Serbian subcontractors seem to have been tasked principally with animation work.

Taken together, the time of Rockstar India's establishment and the job designations of Indian Rockstar Games employees as expressed in the game's credits suggest that the workers were concerned with realizing artistic ideas and demands originating somewhere else, like Rockstar Games' headquarters in New York City and particularly the Housers and other top-level creatives, rather than performing original creative tasks or even game design in the narrow sense of the term. In other words, these highly skilled Asian (as well as, to a lesser extent, Southeastern European) workers provided the manual labor necessary to actually produce a functioning videogame rather than merely envisioning one, especially one of the ambition and scale of *RDR2* – in short: the kind of labor providing the "formulaic components" which Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter speak of. This is exactly the kind of labor that is both indispensable and easily overlooked when thinking about who makes AAA videogames, when most of the public discourse centers on high-level designers and other creatives such as, in Rockstar Games' case, the Housers. As Jamie Woodcock explains, an essential part of AAA videogame production

> is a range of paid work that is often hidden too. As production scales up over a global level, the outsourcing of work has become particularly prevalent. This is "a less visible facet of the globalization of game production," which includes "tasks that are farmed out," including "'porting'" existing games to additional platforms, rote programming, and made-to-order artwork. This involves new divisions of labor, shifting less profitable or more routine aspects of development to different parts of the world. This kind of hidden immaterial labor is performed by "below the line game workers." In the Global North, the line separates these workers from the more "glamorous" aspects of videogame developers, which rely on the work of those "below the line." This involves work like testing games, which, although it sounds like the kind of job many would have wanted as a child, it is a much less glamorous and repetitive kind of work, necessary for ensuring that the finished videogame is ready. Often the workers "are hoping to join the above the line club," putting up with precarious conditions and low pay with the promise of later promotion. (71)

Although it is difficult to tell what kind of work exactly the team at Rockstar India carried out – it is unclear what exactly falls under "animations" – it is quite likely

that it concerned the nitty-gritty of making things work on the screen rather than creating original artwork. Ironically enough, however, it is the final product – the realization of the artistic vision – that receives all the attention, which is to say that, generally, the surface impression of AAA videogames wows audiences in such a way as to render the intricacies of the machine underneath and the excessive amounts of labor that went into creating it invisible. This is why new AAA videogames frequently appear like magic to us: their elaborate presentation and complex systems obscure how they were made, or even that they were made by labor, as "each part of the labor process becomes 'congealed' (to use Marx's term) within the videogame" (Woodcock 36). In this regard, according to MacDonald

> the job of a game coder is quite sad: it involves spending years creating very complex and impressive systems, only to make them appear invisible as possible to the player. Behind every natural-seeming moment in *Red Dead 2* – someone sitting outside a saloon, a horse dipping its head to nibble on grass – are several intricate, interlocking cogs of code determining how the simulation behaves.

He further writes that "[i]t is tempting to think of developers as gods, conjuring a world into existence, but the reality is that it involves a tremendous amount of often tedious work. Even something as simple as a lifelike tree takes several people months to make: some to draw and model it, some to code how the wind moves its leaves, others to record and mix its rustling." Here we enter precisely the point in the production process of *RDR2* occupied, among others, by Rockstar India.

One thing that demands attention here is the way in which AAA videogame production seems to follow a certain neocolonial logic in the structure of its process and in the racialized stratification of hierarchies at Rockstar Games (cf. Hammar, "Producing" 150). In this reading, the artistic vision, the guidance of the development process, and ultimately the final creative decisions come from the white European-American executives in the New York City headquarters, led by the Houser brothers as the (albeit reclusive) public faces of Rockstar, whose names are inseparable from both the *Grand Theft Auto* and the *Red Dead Redemption* franchises, at least as the public reception of Rockstar's videogames goes. The tedious labor of making the ideas of higher-level creatives work is then carried out by lower-level employees around the globe, who execute instructions and realize ideas rather than designing the visible components of the videogames themselves. Some of this manual labor is then outsourced to particular Asian countries – mainly China and India – where the supply of skilled tech workers is plentiful, where wages are low compared to the United States and Western Europe, and where labor protection laws are comparatively lax (cf. Hammar, "Producing" 157). All of this is a practice common in many industries but especially the tech industry, of which the video-

game industry is arguably a part. The following paragraphs focus particularly on the third point, labor conditions, specifically in how it relates to the development of *RDR2*, larger questions concerning the possibility of a cultural form like the database Western, as well as how the latter is inherently connected to the theory and practice of late neoliberal capitalism in a globally operating, financialized AAA videogame industry.

This aspect of *Red Dead Redemption* and the database Western – which is critical to the politics it produces – received public attention after an article by Harold Goldberg about *RDR2*'s development, including first-hand commentary by Dan Houser, was published by *Vulture*, a website affiliated with *New York Magazine*, which included a version of the same article in its print issue. In the article, Houser is quoted verbatim commenting on the working hours that made the release of *RDR2* possible:

> The polishing, rewrites, and reedits Rockstar does are immense. "We were working 100-hour weeks" several times in 2018, Dan says. The finished game includes 300,000 animations, 500,000 lines of dialogue, and many more lines of code. Even for each *RDR2* trailer and TV commercial, "we probably made 70 versions, but the editors may make several hundred. Sam and I will both make lots of suggestions, as will other members of the team." (qtd. in Goldberg)

Though Rockstar Games was quick to specify that Houser was only talking about the senior writing team of which he is a member, and not the majority of Rockstar employees involved in producing the game (Schreier, "We Were"), Goldberg's article and others by various videogame media outlets that followed it quickly sparked larger conversations about so-called crunch in the videogame industry.

According to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter,

> "[c]runch time" is the industry term for an ostensibly unusual period of crisis in the production schedule, when hours intensify, often up to sixty-five to eighty hours a week, sometimes more: one-hundred-hour weeks are not unheard of . . . . The root of crunch time lies in the time sensitivity . . . such as working to meet deadlines for sales seasons and licensed media events. For smaller studios, the need to meet the development milestones set by publishers or to make the design changes they demand provides additional pressure; and for all companies, the complexity of game production, the likelihood of unanticipated bugs, and the difficulty of synchronizing the cycles of large teams do indeed provide plenty of opportunity for sudden emergency. (59)

The end of this explanatory passage is instructive in regard to projects on the scale of *RDR2*: The sheer immensity of the game and its gameworld magnifies all of the factors mentioned in the above passage, making the emergence of crunch not only more likely but also more extensive. "Work late, come home, sleep in between stressing about bugs and end up dreaming about code, go back into

work and repeat," as Woodcock summarizes the process (82). The "emergency" invoked by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, however, appears less and less accurate a label in a constantly changing contemporary AAA videogame industry, as *Polygon*'s Colin Campbell points out: "Crunch is the name given to working intense overtime, sometimes for stretches that last weeks or months. In the game industry specifically, it was generally associated with the period leading up to a game's launch. But in the age of early access releases, post-launch updates, downloadable content, and games as a service, crunch can be a constant problem." The issue Campbell addresses here is that a work practice that used to be an exception, as unavoidable as it was unpleasant but usually manageable and somewhat calculable in its extent and duration, seems to be on its way to becoming a norm, if it is not already.

In the specific case of *RDR2*, which was only the first of several AAA releases that have since received attention, *Kotaku* soon released a long piece titled "Inside Rockstar Games' Culture of Crunch," researched and written by Jason Schreier and based on accounts of current as well as former Rockstar employees interviewed by the author. After opening with an anecdotal example of a particular case in which a seemingly minor creative decision – "[adding] black bars to the top and bottom of every non-interactive cutscene in hopes of making those scenes feel more cinematic" – leads to extensive and laborious revisions of large parts of the code, Schreier addresses the question of the new normal in AAA videogame production early on: "This isn't crunch that came in a burst of a few weeks – it's crunch that, those employees say, has lasted for months or even years." If, however, this kind of practice in developing videogames, at least blockbusters like *RDR2*, truly is the new normal, this begs a larger question, one that Schreier likewise raises in his text: "Rockstar makes some of the most impressive games in the world. The question is: What's the cost?" ("Inside Rockstar").

Crunch has a long history in the videogame industry, although it used to denote only a limited, comparatively short period of time right before the release of a new videogame. Over the past one and a half decades, however, reports on the prevalence of crunch outside of that final phase and its becoming a normal part of the development of videogames have become more frequent. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, for instance, cite a 2004 report by the International Game Developers Association, which found that "[w]hile a majority of workers found their jobs stimulating, the industry was characterized by a culture of 'forced workaholism.' . . . More than half of respondents said that 'management sees crunch as a normal part of doing business'" (61). Not only were such practices found to be taking a toll on worker's personal lives and health, they frequently happened under a lack or at least delay of compensation: "For just under half of respondents, overtime was uncompensated – and when it was, it was usually in the form not of direct

payment but of time off at project completion, royalties, or profit sharing; only 4 percent of companies paid overtime in cash" (Dyer Witheford and de Peuter 62). Similar findings can be found in more recent reports; the same points about expected crunch combined with uncertainties about compensation feature in nearly every current story about major publishers producing (or maintaining) the latest blockbusters under conditions that force workers to push the envelope in ways detrimental to their health and social life. In his *Polygon* story about crunch in maintaining Epic Games' hugely popular, world-wide multiplayer hit *Fortnite*, Campbell summarizes the approach to keeping such a popular videogame enjoyable for its players and profitable for its publisher as follows: "According to multiple sources, workers at Epic operate on an implicit understanding that working crunch is an expected part of their role. This attitude toward crunch has become a trend in the AAA game industry, and is routinely cited in reporting on crunch at other studios." What insights like this show is that something that used to be an exception has become an integral, if not indispensable, part of AAA videogame development: "These stories of extreme pressure and scrambling to meet multiple, chaotically managed deadlines are the norm in the development process of videogames" (Woodcock 71).

As Schreier's *Kotaku* story reveals, Rockstar Games is a prime example of the practices sketched out above. Particularly the combination of a "culture of 'forced workaholism'" (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter 61) and a (mostly) delayed compensation is interesting here:

> Nobody interviewed said they had worked 100-hour weeks – that would equate to seven 14-hour days – but many said their average weekly hours came close to 55 or 60, which would make for six 10-hour days. Most current and former Rockstar employees said they had been asked or felt compelled to work nights and weekends. Some were on hourly contracts and got paid for overtime, but many were salaried and did not receive any compensation for their extra hours. Those who are still at the company hope that their 2018 bonuses – expected to be significant if *Red Dead 2* does well – will help make up for that. (Schreier, "Inside Rockstar")

This is a kind of process in which excessive overtime becomes normalized at the same time as its monetary reward – there is no doubt that for many of these game workers, partaking in the creation of such a videogame is a reward in itself – comes in the form of the promise, not guarantee, that the final product will sell so well the bonus will make up for all the hardships one had to endure during production. In the case of Rockstar's top franchises *Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption*, this certainly appears to be a safe bet in purely economic terms. "Bonuses are a big deal at Rockstar Games," Schreier writes,

> The standard compensation package for a Rockstar employee includes an annual bonus, one that grows substantially during years when the company ships a game. It's tied to a number of factors, Rockstar says, including the sales of that game and individual employee performance. Some former Rockstar employees described receiving hefty bonuses after the first *Red Dead Redemption*, sometimes reaching the mid-five digits. ("Inside Rockstar")

Clearly, such cases of crunch cannot, strictly speaking, be called economic exploitation, yet exploitation they are; the practice either way puts risk and strain on the worker. This is not unlike what John T. Caldwell has called "spec work" – "spec" as in speculation – in his research on the television industry, by which he refers to unpaid labor that is performed under the hope of eventually being compensated for it in the future (35). But most importantly, they reveal a great deal about the deep entanglement between videogames and neoliberal capitalism, with its transferal of risk to the worker.

The question of why videogame workers endure such labor conditions is complex. As Schreier's article in particular demonstrates, many of the people are simply proud to be involved in the production of such state-of-the-art videogames. Nonetheless, even this proves tricky since "[o]ne common fear at Rockstar is that if you leave during a game's production, your name won't be in the credits, no matter how much work you put in. Several former Rockstar employees lamented this fact, and Rockstar confirmed it when I asked," Schreier writes ("Inside Rockstar"). Due to the importance of being credited for bonuses and subsequent career paths, "the industry-wide tactic of removing anyone from the credits of a game if they leave or get fired before a game is released," as Hammar describes it, "is effective to suppress dissent and force developers to fall in line" ("Producing" 154). Additionally, there is the factor of the fear of simply being replaced. Companies like Rockstar are among the leading publishers of videogames, so those who work for them are incentivized to feel lucky they get to work there. Moreover, some of it has to do with the composition of the workforce for these AAA productions, where "[m]any workers . . . are hired as contractors, further limiting their rights" (C. Campbell). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter further expand on the question:

> Why do game workers put up with these long hours? Demand for skilled programmers and designers is high. Companies anxious about losing talent would seem to have an incentive to treat workers well. But while experienced game workers are in short supply, new entrants are plentiful and well aware of their disposability. Though excessive hours are widespread, they are disproportionately endured by the youthful contingent, whose stamina helps set a studio norm of overwork. One studio owner we spoke to, who had also worked for other developers, was straightforward: "Companies tend to get these young guys that come out of film school, game programming school, or art school and get them to work their asses off. The mechanism for doing that is the game industry's corporate culture: 'You don't have to leave because we give you all the Pepsi and all the potato chips you'd ever want.'" And

> while smaller studios can offer chips and a couch to sleep on, the attractions proffered by larger ones, such as EA, are more extravagant. (Dyer Witheford and de Peuter 62)

Equal parts pride, the chance to turn your passion into your job, and the fear of being replaced – this is the cocktail of crunch in the AAA videogame industry, in which many have only recently begun "calling for game industry workers to unionize in order to protect their rights" (C. Campbell).

While all of these are intriguing details of the exploitative practices behind AAA videogame development, there is a larger question here which begs to be answered: Is it even possible to produce such videogames without crunch? Or, in Schreier's words: "Is crunch required to make games with the scope and scale of *Red Dead Redemption* and its sequel" (Schreier, "Inside Rockstar")? The likely answer is that these kinds of games are only possible because of a culture of crunch. Because of the reasons already mentioned, like shipping deadlines synched with specific sales seasons; the ongoing transformation in the industry toward games-as-service, which means individual titles are not really finished for quite some time, perhaps years, after their release; and the importance of meeting shareholders' expectations in a fully financialized videogame industry, crunch will likely remain an integral part of how mass market videogames are made, especially if the kind of rapid technological advances players of AAA titles have gotten used to are meant to continue. The game workers themselves have no illusions about this, as Schreier's research shows: "One current employee at Rockstar NYC, for example, told me that they'd been working 60- to 70-hour weeks for the past two years. They said that they can't see themselves doing this kind of work for that much longer. But they also said they didn't see how else a game like *Red Dead Redemption 2* could be made" ("Inside Rockstar"). If the workers themselves cannot imagine any other way of producing something like *RDR2*, then the culture of crunch will likely become even worse in the future unless the culture of mainstream videogaming changes radically.

It is now time to bring Rockstar India back into the discussion because they form a noteworthy gap in the story told by Schreiber: "One studio we did not hear much from was Rockstar India, although those at other offices said they'd heard that overtime was bad there as well" ("Inside"). The question here is how the offshoring of parts of the production process of videogames, particularly to India and China, hence mimicking long-standing developments in other industries, features in the logics and practices described above. These are not the sweatshops known from other industries such as the textile industry, to be sure; rather, these are lucrative employment opportunities for a sheer endless supply of highly qualified local developers and programmers. Yet it is conspicuous that Schreier's report mentions that he heard nothing other from Rockstar India than

employees from other studios claiming, "they'd heard that overtime was bad there as well" ("Inside Rockstar"). This point is inseparable from the fact that Rockstar India was only founded in 2016, when *Red Dead Redemption 2* was already well underway and just entering the crunch-prone final phase of development. How does this relate to the politics of a widely celebrated cultural product created under, and in fact made possible only by, a culture of crunch? Furthermore, what is the role of an increasing offshoring of such high-skill development tasks as potential leverage in sustaining exploitative labor practices at home, as suggested by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (64–65)? It is difficult to get reliable information on these matters, but they all relate to the complex question of the very possibility of videogames like *Red Dead Redemption 2* and, hence, their politics, which cannot be separated from their production.

It appears that videogames of the scale of *RDR2* are presently impossible without prolonged and normalized crunch. The particular conditions of production delineated above – exploited labor and neoliberal logics combined with neocolonial practices – are the prerequisites for contemporary ambioperative gameworlds and for the database Western to exist in the first place. Impressive as *RDR2*'s ambioperative gameworld is, videogames like this are unnecessarily detailed, which creates unnecessary and excessive demand for labor at the same time as it creates an artificial demand for exactly this level of detail since it becomes a marker of quality, even as, from a labor perspective, "[u]sually, realism is not worth it" (MacDonald).

Dan Houser's defense that only the senior writing team was working the 100-hour weeks he mentioned amounts to little more than the myth of hard-working top-level executives leading the vanguard and giving more than what is expected of employees. Even if true, such a practice puts pressure on lower-level employees to work more and live up to the example. Moreover, anything decided on the level of lead creatives leads to work on the lower levels of development, so that whatever is produced in those 100-hour weeks automatically adds work hours along the line. "Dan and Sam Houser," Schreier writes,

> are renowned for rebooting, overhauling, and discarding large chunks of their games. Through eight years of development on *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the Housers and other directors have made a number of major changes to the story, the core gameplay mechanics, and the game's overall presentation. It's a process that some see as essential for making a game of this nature, but it's also one that leads to a great deal of overtime, and has contributed to a culture of crunch at Rockstar Games that is impossible to deny. (Schreier, "Inside Rockstar")

Part of the problem is that, as work is added along the line due to those kinds of creative changes, their implementation moves closer to any deadlines the further one goes down the line, so that the highest pressure is always on those at the bot-

tom; and those at the bottom are generally the most precarious workers. The 'makers' at the top in these cases surf on a wave of exploitation, while the system on which they rely is nothing less than a sign of bad management.

Playing American by developing database Westerns collaboratively across the globe is a symptom of a neoliberal capitalistic system of production that fundamentally relies on exploitation, generates wealth and fame for the few, and perpetuates the myth that hard work results both in wealth and in products one can be proud of, to the extent that working overtime is framed as something to be proud of and as something that will be rewarded. The very process of producing ambioperative gameworlds like that of *RDR2* is reproductive of the neoliberal ideology permeating economies around the world.

## 4.4 Conclusion: Playing American in *Red Dead Redemption*

Developed by an international team of developers playing American, Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* remediates a rather limited sample of (revisionist) Westerns, but its open-world database structure and the logic of selection governing the gameplay suggest a much more transformative interrelation between the videogames and the Western genre. Indeed, the "atmospheres of the past" in *Red Dead Redemption* present themselves as so dense that the games can feel like "authentic" experiences of turn-of the-century America (Zimmermann, "Historical" 20) that "can be continuously re-played and thus [become] . . . specimen of user-generated history" (Razzi 296). Yet the database structure and mechanics actually induce a withdrawal from history. Decontextualizing recognizable Western elements to make them available for random access means divesting these elements from the causal and consequential relationships that usually connect them, which are the substance of history. Ironically, the more 'realistic' these videogame Westerns get, the further they retreat from (historical) realism as they render history dispensable; after all, "realisticness and realism are two very different things" (Galloway, *Gaming* 74). This amounts to an ill-fated attempt to shake off the ideological baggage of a contested genre and produces a pseudo-apolitical entertainment experience of an ostensibly neutral, simulated American West to play with at will, modeled after the myths of select revisionist Westerns. Responsibility is thus shifted to the players, exhibiting a politics of disavowal and evasion that is too seldom countered narratively in *RDR* and *RDR2*. Social questions of the time represented, from the reverberations of two centuries of Native American genocide to the ills of industrial capitalism, do appear in both titles but largely appear gratuitous (cf. Wright, "Rockstar" 9–14).

The database form, it appears, reveals itself as not so indifferent after all. The intraface points us to this insight as it connects the cultural with the technical dimension. It dissolves the boundary between the diegetic and the nondiegetic. As it enables player acts within the diegesis, it also reveals that the gameworld is not a fully integrated simulation; the intraface "indicates the implicit presence of the outside within the inside. And this 'outside' means something quite specific: *the social*" (Galloway, *Interface* 42). Not only does the intraface point to the existence of the player, in doing so it also points toward the social conditioning of the database Western. What items are included in the database and how they can be accessed and interacted with – these aspects are shaped as they are by design. They could be different, but they are what they are because of deliberate choices made by the gameworlds' creators, based on the latters' conception of the Western. This leads back to the cultural dimension of the gameworld-as-interface. Every time *RDR* and *RDR2* prompt the player to act in some way, the interface makes explicit which kinds of actions, scenarios, and scopes of possibility have been deemed appropriate by the developer. As "the interface is a form of relation" (Hookway 4), the shape of *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds determines players' relation to the Western genre – and, by extension, to American history.

The database Western, then, reproduces a popular but extremely limited view of the genre even as it thoroughly reconfigures it formally. The problem runs much deeper than replicating the revisionist canon and is technical all the way down. The database Western may rely on random access, but it is not random. "The edges of the work are the politics of the work" (Galloway, *Interface* 42), and the edges of *Red Dead Redemption* become visible in its interface(s). Whatever the franchise draws from its inspirations remains, hard-coded in software. The mode of mediation has changed, the mode of interaction has changed, but the values are carried over, now paired with a transfer of responsibility to the player in a freely navigable open world serving as database and interface. Playing American here means enacting a select view of the American West(ern) while taking on responsibility for that view through one's acts of 'selaction' in the gameworld.

The problem of the database Western as a form is that it resists a historical dimension. It is always about the here and now and nothing else – no beginning, no end, no before or after, no lasting effects, no stable relationships. It evades politics as a form, yet it produces a politics depending on how it is instantiated. Being hopelessly incomplete, owed to the nature of genre formation, necessarily demands choices: the setting of parameters within which the logic of the database, with its processes of selection, shall work. In these choices, which are visible in the interface(s), one can locate the cultural work of the database Western. Like previous Westerns, *Red Dead Redemption* is about history, "with American history left intriguingly open and malleable to new interpretation" (Wills, *Gamer* 82). But

unlike previous Westerns, *Red Dead Redemption* does not partake in history, at least not at its core. As they sideline history and indulge in randomness, selection, and customized experiences, these videogames employ the past as an aesthetic but refuse responsibility for the past as reality. Encapsulating the ongoing influence of the past on the present, William Faulkner wrote that "[t]he past is never dead. It's not even past" (85). In *Red Dead Redemption*, the past is indeed undead, but only to the extent that it returns as an empty vessel serving an infinite present of gameplay acts without consequence. The videogames reproduce American history and then disengage that history. The politics of the database Western, then, is a politics of withdrawal from history even as the genre remains inextricably tied to American history.

As database Westerns, *RDR* and *RDR2* constitute a new figuration of the genre that is fundamentally different from its predecessors, both structurally and materially – the latter also involving the ecological effects of contemporary gaming technologies, even though this cannot be addressed within the scope of this chapter (cf. Chang, *Playing* 148–158). From the perspective of its production, the politics of the database Western in *Red Dead Redemption* align substantially with the politics of late neoliberal capitalism as it manifests itself in a globally operating, financialized AAA videogame industry. The possibility of *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western depends on labor practices that rely on the exploitation of the workers' passion for videogames, which enables the economically viable normalization of crunch, and on a partial transference of financial risk to the worker, whose initially unpaid overtime then becomes "spec work" that may or may not be compensated through future sales of the product (J. Caldwell 35). In addition, the structure of the development process at Rockstar Games shows traces of the neocolonial practices common in contemporary cognitive capitalism and particularly the tech industries, in which the realization of the perceived vision of senior, usually white male, creatives in leading American companies is made possible only by the lower-level labor of people of color, often from or even based in East, South, or Southeast Asia – and playing American in the sense of producing something immediately perceived as American – at the back end of the production process. The interfaces that are the richly detailed and widely celebrated gameworlds of *Red Dead Redemption* must be understood as an effect of the exploitative labor practices in the AAA videogame industry outlined before. The American culture reproduced by the database Western in both form and production is one that idolizes American history – both in actuality and in representation through the Western, which itself is an artificial distinction – while refusing to engage that very history at the same time as it structures work, risk, and return of investment in strict accordance with ideologies of global, neoliberal capitalism.

# Conclusion: Past, Present, and Futures of Playing American

In the summer of 2005, I got lost in playing American for the first time. The PC version of *San Andreas* had just been released, a friend of a friend had bought it, and as it ended up in my hands and then on my hard drive, my PC struggling to run it in a playable way, I got sucked into the perhaps most visceral and lasting experience of America, or what I perceived to be America at the time, I can remember prior to my first trip to the United States. Drawing attention to the impact simulated environments can have on one's perception of real places, Wills writes:

> The fake or simulation inevitably shapes our view of reality, as Umberto Eco found on a trip in the 1980s to Disney's version of the American South prior to embarking for the real New Orleans. Perhaps, the framing happens when an international gamer plays Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto*, establishing his or her "original" America before disembarking in New York as a fresh immigrant; the initial wanderings in the game world replace the first vision of the Statue of Liberty as the gamer's introduction to America. (*Gamer* 18)

In all honesty, I was that international gamer when I first arrived in the United States as an undergraduate student in 2010 for a semester abroad at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. As I was making my way from the small airport into this typical midwestern city and to its run-of-the-mill public university campus, many images came to my mind – the songs of Bruce Springsteen, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, even the film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* – but what that short commute felt like was *San Andreas*, the videogame being set on the West Coast, not in the Midwest. Passing fields and warehouses, listening to the radio commercials, even just watching the traffic lights – it all felt very much like one of my favorite activities in *San Andreas*: driving through the backroads in the rural areas beyond the videogame's three playable cities, listening to the country music radio station K-Rose, and simply taking in the atmosphere of this artificial world that was so clunky and yet so beautiful. Ever since then, when 17-year-old me would roam the virtual California countryside to the sound of Willie Nelson and his peers, I have been fascinated with how a videogame could feel not only like an actual place but a specifically 'American' place – whatever that means. Even after losing interest in videogames for a few years after graduating from German high school, the memory of moving through and sensing the world of *San Andreas* stuck with me, to the extent that five years later it remained a major reference point in navigating the spaces of the actual United States in Lincoln, Nebraska.


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Playing American, in one way or another, has always been a feature of videogames, but it becomes significant the moment it affects American culture by reproducing it. The previous chapters have detailed which figurations the phenomenon of playing American takes in recent popular open-world videogames, here described as ambioperative gameworlds, and how these reproduce American culture in different ways. The very production of the videogames concerned constitutes an act of playing American as international developers, influenced by a globally dominant American pop culture, create virtual worlds plausibly perceived as American, as especially Rockstar Games' flagship franchises show. The cultural work of such videogames goes beyond the level of gameplay or gamic representation. Chapter 2, for instance, demonstrated how the *Grand Theft Auto* series has prompted various actors (in the Latourian sense of the word) within American culture to reproduce, maintain, or alter discourses on several matters of concern, hence contributing to American self-descriptions which are central to the ongoing existence of American culture. At the same time, the operational logics and procedural rhetorics of these videogames often constitute continuations and replications of real-world processes – to the extent that the distinction between real and virtual world is an entirely artificial one, which mainly serves an analytic function, while 'virtual' (or in-game) and 'real' (or outside) here are necessarily merely different iterations of the same reality. As chapter 3 has shown, for example, *Watch Dogs*' gameplay extends the logics of contemporary surveillance regimes into the realm of videogame play, naturalizing the practices of watching and being watched rather than working to overcome them, while simultaneously affirming the racializing and racist foundations of such practices. And even the production of AAA videogames itself works to reproduce American culture as it functions along the lines of a globally operating neoliberal capitalism and its exploitative labor practices, as chapter 4 has shown in the case of *Red Dead Redemption*. The series was furthermore shown to exemplify how ambioperative gameworlds can reconfigure popular genres in the form of a database, which deprives them of their historical contingency and relationality, thus withdrawing from history and disavowing politics. To return to Karl Marx's assertion cited earlier once more, these examples show that production and reproduction, in the context of the reproduction of American culture through playing American, do indeed transpire in the very same act rather than one following the other. In this sense, production is reproduction is production is reproduction.

The point of the cultural work of transnational AAA videogame production remains relevant at a more general level, too. If before I wrote that ideas about America have forever been circulated around the globe, often but not always originating in the United States but then taking on a life of their own, most effectively transmitted by popular culture, a look at the AAA videogame industry can offer a glimpse at the very materiality of this circulation of ideas that amount to a

transnational imaginary; it is, if you will, one of the material bases for the imaginary. To just briefly revisit the case of *Grand Theft Auto*, the fact that this particular vision of America that took the world of videogames, and eventually popular culture, by storm was created in unremarkable, run-of-the-mill offices in Dundee (later Edinburgh), Scotland, by a team of Brits, many of whom had never even been to the United States before, is absolutely key to understanding the transnational imaginary at the source of producing America. The people who created the noted sense of place in Liberty City and Los Santos likely never commuted from Queens to Manhattan to get to work or frequented a barber shop in Compton; that is, they did not have any substantial first-hand experience of everyday life in New York or Los Angeles, no understanding of the ordinariness of those places, which often remains invisible behind their city myths. Yet they crafted, again and again, a world that, with its visuals, sounds, processes, characters, and stories, evoked something unmistakably American.

Looking at the development process of AAA videogames offers insights into the materiality of the transnational imaginary because it turns our attention to concrete actors and their actions. By development process I mean not the specific steps of coding, testing, and improving software but the more basic practice of conceptualizing and then realizing a creative idea. Individual actors make creative decisions which are grounded in particular circumstances and influences; some of these are observable while others are not, perhaps not even by the actors themselves. I have sketched out one example for this in my discussion of *Grand Theft Auto*'s origins in chapter 2, but similar mechanisms are at work in AAA videogame development – as well as, arguably, other forms of cultural production – all the time. In this sense, then, the transnational imaginary of America is not merely some formation of ideas floating around in space; it is, rather, manifested in and sustained by material action, by concrete texts, by physical media. When CJ looks, talks, walks, and acts the way he does in *San Andreas*, this is because several non-American developers have made him so, and they have made him so because of a number of reasons, some of them merely technological (computational game design restraints, for example) and others thoroughly cultural and ideational, but even in the latter case always grounded in material sources and the visceral experience of a predominately America-inflected popular culture. But even when a Rockstar Games creative with an American passport draws up the town of Valentine for *RDR2*, their vision is grounded in palpable media which gave form to the American West prior to the videogame; historical photographs, dime novels, Western films, they all work on the creative decisions taken by the developer, and they form an archive jointly drawn upon by game workers of all backgrounds. What is more, even while the vision may be American, it may be executed abroad, as in the case of *RDR2*. The America imagined and produced in

such a videogame is, therefore, a transnational product either way. Every imaginary has a material basis, such as physically present and palpable media shaped by human hands, and the imaginary of America is transnational all the way simply because these media are not 'made in America' but manufactured across chains of production distributed around the globe. Publishers like Ubisoft and Rockstar Games have offices and studios in several European, American, and Asian countries, and they frequently outsource work to other studios independent of their companies. Videogames like *GTA V* are produced in collaborative efforts by several of these studios, all of which likely employ a workforce of diverse national and cultural backgrounds. Whichever way these titles are made, what previous mediations they draw on, and how they succeed in creating an atmosphere that is somehow, and often unmistakably, perceived as American – they form a part of the transnational imaginary that generates visions of America, and that has been doing so since the continent was first colonized, in the very way they are developed. In this sense, then, America as a transnational idea and project is only further amplified by the global distribution of creative labor in the mass-market entertainment industry in the twenty-first century, of which AAA videogames are the prime example.

While such a transnational imaginary is the source – as well as, eventually, the destination – of the America conjured by the videogames studied here, their ambioperative gameworlds are its concrete figurations. In other words, the primary locus of the American atmospheres processed here is to be found in these gamic environments, specifically in their distinct design as ambioperative gameworlds. Both the general sense of America created by all these videogames and the specific facets of American society and culture – past, present, and future – depicted in the particular titles studied here operate predominately through the gameworlds' ambient operations and the player's interaction with these, which is essential to the franchises' reproduction of American culture.

Research on videogames within frameworks and institutions of American studies continues to become more widespread, more established, more accepted, and more sophisticated. The approaches applied in this book, I hope, can serve as models for productive ways to study videogames in the field of American studies. Videogames with palpable cultural effects are plentiful, and the selection of case studies here is but a miniscule portion of a wide array of titles exerting cultural agency here and there; future research needs to attend to those works. Myriad actor-networks around popular videogames are in want of description, as carried out for *Grand Theft Auto* here, which may produce further insights about the reproduction of American culture in the twenty-first century. Videogame representations and simulations of urgent social dynamics and contested cultural, economic, and political practices demand consideration, as they can work to affirm the status quo or

challenge it; which of the two it is, however, may not be readily apparent without close analysis, as the case of *Watch Dogs* shows. Finally, the rich inventory of work in media theory and practice across the field of American studies should be utilized even more to attend to the roles played by different forms and modes of mediation in transforming cultural assemblages like popular genres and to the ensuing effects. A change in form, as the example of *Red Dead Redemption* shows, can lead to new relationships between audiences and cultural content, which may alter the cultural work and politics of established cultural formations. All these directions call for being employed at the intersections of American studies and game studies in the near future, for being combined in productive ways, and for opening up new avenues and connections not anticipated in this book. Videogames are an important field to work on in American studies and perhaps this book and the results, suggestions, and even open questions it produced can play its part, however tiny, in advancing this area of research.

Beyond American studies, the ever-expanding field of game studies already considers videogames in all their variety, overlapping at times with analog game studies and pushing new directions in digital media theory, platform studies, and other fields central to grasping some of the most urgent transformations in twenty-first-century societies. The kinds of AAA videogames examined in this book certainly belong to the most studied research subjects in game studies; my own research focus, from this perspective, is far from surprising. Yet introducing the concept of ambient operations and attempting to productively apply it in an investigation into the (reproductive) cultural work of specific franchises, may provide game studies with yet another tool to fathom the expressive complexity of videogames and their manifold effects. As the question of atmospheres appears to gain currency within the field, and rightly so, theorizing ambient operations may aid in keeping in view the smaller, individually expressive elements often confined to the background in videogames. While open-world videogames like the ones studied here display the highest concentration of ambient operations, the concept is not restricted to this form and may prove useful in understanding the matters expressed by other kinds of gameworlds. At best, ambient operations as a concept have the potential to shed new light on objects thought to be understood comprehensively already, or to complicate seemingly straightforward interpretations of particular videogames or gaming practices.

While much work lies ahead in all kinds of videogame forms and genres in relation to American culture, the growing segment of online games appears as one of the most apparent and most urgent topics for future research along the lines of the arguments proposed in this book. Multiplayer-only titles like *Fortnite* continue to dominate and will likely only get more popular in the future. At the same time, *GTA Online* and *Red Dead Online* demonstrate the massive potential

for profit over longer periods of time for franchises originally designed with a focus in singleplayer gameplay. Other franchises, particularly in the first-person shooter genre have long shifted their focus to online multiplayer gameplay and highly profitable micro transactions. Online gaming clearly is here to stay, and it is bound to produce instances of playing American over and over again; needless to say, online videogames will remain highly relevant to study in the context of transnational American studies.

Dwelling on the point of online gaming a little longer, it showcases several pertinent points that demonstrate how quickly the study of videogames can lead to other, more fundamental questions relevant to comprehending the functioning of culture in the twenty-first century. To return to the question of playing American is this context, first a very general question: how does online functionality in videogames relate to America generally? One could argue that the mere fact of online functions, which have become the norm for all gaming systems and most videogames today, points to America in the sense that the very operation of the internet (as well as its origins) would not be possible without US-based companies, their technical infrastructure and their services. Just as the emergence of the internet cannot be explained without the efforts of American research institutions and the US military, the internet today would largely be unusable without the servers and services of Google, Amazon, and similar companies, as indicated already in the introduction. Yet the picture becomes a bit more complicated once the question turns to where those servers are. A server farm (or data center) may be run by Google but located in Finland. Coming back to online gaming specifically, the servers run by leading publishers like Ubisoft, which host the online gameplay functionalities of titles like the *Watch Dogs* videogames, may likewise be physically situated anywhere in the world but maintained from a single studio somewhere else, whether in the United States or elsewhere (remember that Ubisoft, for instance, is a French company). Hence the services hosted on those servers may be called American only in that same transnational conceptualization that understands America as a concept related to but reaching beyond the nation state of the United States and the borders of its territory.

The most significant resonance between the phenomenon of playing American and the practices of online videogaming can be found in a US-dominated variety of neoliberal capitalism that has emerged in the twenty-first century, namely "[s]urveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 6). At this point, the example of *Watch Dogs* comes back into play. Engaging in online gameplay today – or even using common gaming platforms in the first place – means being subjected to dataveillance just like any other online activity does. These systems monitor their users, keep track of in-game achievements, register which games are purchased via those systems and which are ultimately played to what extent, and eventually use the information acquired

to personalize their offers and potentially sell the same data to other parties, so that it may end up in micro-targeted advertising just as most data gathered from tracking internet user does. The *Watch Dogs* franchise is an instructive case in point because as videogames for the dominant platforms with an online component – one that partly finds expression in ambient operations, as chapter 3 demonstrated – both titles participate in dataveillance practices at the same time as the games feature these practices as central themes in their gameworlds, narratives, and mechanics. The constellation in *WD* and *WD2* is a perfect example for how, in the ambioperative gameworlds examined here, the practice of playing American is at once a representational, practical, and material question.

This simultaneity of the representational, practical, and material dimensions of playing American in *Watch Dogs* in relation to online functionality is epitomized in the recurring task of hacking data centers in the videogames. Narratively framed and justified as an effort to either gather data on a target or install a backdoor to gain access to or even sabotage otherwise secured systems used by antagonists in the game, the illuminating aspect of these missions can be found in the combination of presentation and action. The data centers players have to enter in order to access the systems are presented as large, dark halls filled with rows and rows of racks accommodating several computers. Illumination is sparse, mainly provided by emergency lighting and the status light of the computing equipment, setting a cold and sterile, purely technical atmosphere suggestive of the realm of the machinic. Like most other hacking challenges in *Watch Dogs*, intruding data centers involves entering security cameras and hence using surveillance technology to gain access to the target of the hack. Sometimes, however, the objective in a data center cannot be hacked remotely and requires a physical hack, which means that it must be accessed by connecting another device to the computer that is the target. In *WD*, this means that Aiden needs to find a way to physically approach the computer himself whereas in *WD2*, this can sometimes be solved by using a small remote-controlled vehicle with a camera and connector to link up with other computers. Once connected to the target computer, players must solve a spatial flow puzzle, often with time limits for each section, which symbolizes the system's firewall expelling the intruder.

The interesting point about these recurring scenes of gameplay in *Watch Dogs* is how the same aspects of representation, practice, and materiality run through all the different layers here. Presented on screen is a particular form of computational technology, which is depicted as the ultimate source for and basis of whatever runs the world in any given narrative context in a particular mission; even more than that, since by extension it also insinuates that these data centers are the foundation of the entire world of data mining, digital profiling, and comprehensive surveillance projected by *Watch Dogs*. As players are inter-

acting with these practices of surveillance, partly by replicating them, they are also reminded of the very materiality of the internet. The latter often seems – in a discourse regularly fixating on digitality, virtuality, cloud computing, and so on – like a thing entirely dissociated from matter and physical objects beyond end user devices, even as it is, among others, precisely the physical infrastructure depicted in these missions that produces and maintains the internet in the first place. This is underlined by the necessity for physical hacks since, after all, not everything is connected, which foregrounds the hardware in a world obsessed with the digital – at once a requirement and effect of computational hardware – and the virtual. Friedrich Kittler, as it were, was right all along: "There is no software," these moments in *Watch Dogs* seem to suggest. This materiality runs through the different layers of *Watch Dogs* in the sense that, with their online components and services, the videogames themselves are dependent on exactly the kind of server rooms they accord such a central importance in their plots and gameplay. One major difference is that Ubisoft's servers, as indicated, may be anywhere in the world, whereas those featured in *Watch Dogs* are located, with only a single exception at the end of *WD2*, exclusively in Chicago and San Francisco – that is, in US-American cities. Just like it matters generally that these videogames focusing on surveillance and data profiling are set in the United States, as I have argued before, it is significant that both titles repeatedly and very explicitly depict crucial digital infrastructure as physically located in the United States. The coupling of setting and theme here works toward the effect of equating the internet with America(n tech companies). This type of mission in *Watch Dogs*, then, demonstrates how playing American is a practice carried out by players who take on the roles of American characters in American worlds, which are represented as distinctly American and in which technologies are represented as distinctly American even as they may not actually be (at least not in the sense of US-based), while engaging with devices made but not produced in the United States and services that, likewise, are run by American companies but that may not be located in the United States. This is playing American on every level, at home and around the globe, and future research at the intersection of American studies and game studies is well advised to attend to this phenomenon.

I would like to end this book with a final example. One of the biggest hypes around a new videogame release in the past years centered on Polish developer CD Projekt RED's *Cyberpunk 2077*, which was released in December 2020. Its announcement and ongoing pre-release marketing as the next milestone in open-world videogames, with a massive ambioperative gameworld set in the fictional Californian Night City, high-end graphics, an engaging cyberpunk setting and story based on the pen-and-paper RPG *Cyberpunk 2020*, Keanu Reeves starring as

one of the main characters, and more resulted in *Cyberpunk 2077* becoming the most highly anticipated videogame of 2020, which is particularly remarkable for a new franchise. If one believed the hype, the title was destined to be one of those works that usher in a new generation of videogames, pushing the medium to the next level.

As the development of *Cyberpunk 2077* neared completion, however, problems started to occur. The release was delayed several times, reports of intense periods of crunch for the developers emerged, and several features announced earlier did not find their way into the final product ("*Cyberpunk 2077*: Staff"; Fenlon). When the videogame was finally released in December 2020, the hype quickly vanished. While the PC version, despite several substantial bugs, received quite favorable reviews across the board ("*Cyberpunk 2077* for PC") – though not exactly constituting a revolution – the console ports proved a disaster. Ridden by technical problems that disfigured the videogame to the level of unplayability, especially on the weaker standard versions of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, even leading to Sony temporarily pulling the title from the PlayStation Store only a week after its release and then warning users of buying the videogame after it had returned to the store (Schreier, "Inside *Cyberpunk*"; Warren). In terms of content, while *Cyberpunk 2077* was received as engaging and entertaining, the title drew criticism for its hollowing out of the cyberpunk genre, draining it of its original political agenda and employing it more as a shallow aesthetic, resulting in a retrograde vision of society deprived of progressive impulses, which was particularly visible in its depiction and fetishization of trans people (Sheehan; Chick; Borsari). CD Projekt RED's CEO publicly took responsibility for the title's state on release but did not address the periods of crunch resulting from bad management (Good).

The example of *Cyberpunk 2077* shows that many of the central practices underlying the phenomenon of playing American delineated in this book continue to matter in the field of AAA videogames. The production of a cultural text drawing on, expressing, and being related to American (popular) culture by non-American developers outside the United States; the business incentives and shareholder, as well as audience, expectations leading to pressure, bad management, and ultimately exploitative labor practices; the reconfiguration of a popular genre detaching the genre from its original commitments; it is all there and all of it has the potential to work on American culture within and without. Whether *Cyberpunk 2077* will make any impact in this regard only time can tell. What matters is that the very practices described in this book are not confined to the case studies analyzed here. Playing American will continue to be a feature of popular videogames and their gameworlds, and American culture will continue to be par-

tially reproduced in the production, consumption, and reception of these complex cultural texts and in the cultural practices that accompany them. Whether as continuation or disruption, the reproduction of American culture is going to transpire in popular videogames for a long time to come. Videogames are much more than games, and those who study culture and its evolving transformation are well advised to pay close attention to these agents of cultural reproduction.

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