

Grand Theft Auto: National Identity, Transnational Production, and the Ambivalent Politics of Play

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Keywords

Grand Theft Auto, Rockstar Games, National Identity, Transnational, Regionality

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Grand Theft Auto (Rockstar Games, 1997-; *GTA*) occupies a unique position in the cultural and industrial history of digital games. Initially developed by DMA Design (Dundee, Scotland), and later Rockstar North (Edinburgh, Scotland) under the global brand of Rockstar Games, *GTA* is simultaneously a local product and a transnational cultural artefact. We argue that *GTA* operates as a liminal artefact of identity: Scottish in origin, British in sensibility, American in setting, and global in circulation. Through its production context, aesthetic strategies, and reception, the franchise demonstrates the complex interdependence of national identity and transnational media. Our paper contributes to discussions in game studies on national identity (Webber 2020; Wills 2019) and global production (Kerr, 2017).

GTA's history reveals the blurriness of national boundaries in contemporary cultural production. Emerging from a regional development scene in 1990s Scotland, DMA's experimentation with open-world mechanics was transformed through the capital, marketing, and symbolic authority of BMG Interactive, Take-Two Interactive and Rockstar Games. The franchise materially embodies "transnational production networks" wherein creative labor, capital investment, and cultural value circulate unevenly across global spaces (Dicken 2005; Johns 2006). Our close analysis of the games draws on our experience working with historical games and their paratexts (Donald & Reid 2023, Wright 2023), and critical examination of Rockstar's history and brand management over 3 decades (Wright 2022).

GTA's recurring settings – Liberty City, Vice City, and Los Santos – reflect this dynamic. These fictional cities are less representations of the United States than constructions of America as global myth: mediated imaginings assembled through a Scottish and

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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British lens, developed primarily from mass media imagery (Kerr 2006). The result is what Schoppmeier (2023) views as playable Americana, a world that appears familiar yet functions primarily as parody.

The game's enjoyment is derived from its capacity to let players navigate contradictions: freedom and control, irony and complicity, violence and critique (e.g., Pallant 2013; Murray 2005). The intersectional pleasures emerge not only from open-world affordances of open-world play (mobility, agency, and transgression), but also the ideological slippage between realism and caricature, critique and complicity. *GTA's* America is seductive and grotesque, inviting identification with neoliberal fantasies of entrepreneurial freedom while ridiculing their moral bankruptcy. This ambivalence aligns with Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009) "ironic neoliberalism", a cultural formation that both reproduces and mocks the logic of global capitalism. Players derive fun from inhabiting this irony, embracing the 'outlaw' fantasy while recognizing its artificiality. Intersectional pleasures emerge from the frictions between national identities (Scottish, British, American) and ideological positions (consumerist, critical, satirical).

The idea of disjunctive global cultural flows (Appadurai 1996) provides a framework here. Despite its American settings, *GTA* retains clear traces of Scottish and British cultural traditions. Its dark humor, sardonic tone, and fascination with social hypocrisy reflect a lineage of British satire extending from Monty Python to *Private Eye* (Webber 2020). Rockstar North's creative leads have cited the influence of this comic tradition, suggesting that irreverence and excess are intentional inheritances of British media sensibilities (Keogh 2018). *GTA* exemplifies how media imaginaries move across borders, creating "imagined worlds" that are both de-territorialized and locally inflected. Its pleasures are transnational in structure: produced in one context, representing another, consumed globally. The player's experience becomes an act of cultural translation, navigating between centers and peripheries of meaning.

The Scottish origins of *GTA* shape its perspective on power, class, and identity. Scotland's historical position within the United Kingdom, simultaneously central to and marginalized by British imperial modernity, produces a semi-peripheral creative consciousness (Kirkpatrick 2013). This position enables both participation in and critical distance from dominant Anglo-American media cultures. *GTA's* depiction of America can be interpreted as a post-imperial commentary, that appropriates and satirizes American exceptionalism. We will show that *GTA* inhabits a hybrid cultural space whose identity formed through constant negotiation among local and global forces and from the instability of them, between Scottish-British irony and American bravado, between critique and celebration.

GTA's satirical architecture is visible across its urban spaces, characters and its diegetic media systems (talk radio, advertising, and news). These elements exaggerate American popular culture, politics and social anxieties (e.g., Annandale 2006), forming an extended commentary on neoliberal subjectivity, celebrity, and spectacle (King & Krzywinska 2006). The humor is distinctly British in its reliance on irony, understatement, and absurdity, yet it is delivered through Hollywood-style visual spectacle. This convergence exemplifies the tensions inherent in transnational game design, offering players both immersion in and distance from the cultural worlds being represented. The enjoyment becomes reflexive: players mock American consumerism while actively performing it. The fun embodies the contradictory condition of global media spectatorship in late capitalism, where critique is inseparable from complicity.

GTA's global circulation amplifies these dynamics. For non-American audiences, GTA offers mediated tourism into American mythologies of freedom, criminality and excess. For American players, by contrast, the game can operate as an uncanny mirror. Whether it is an exaggerated parody, too accurate reflection of national identity, or an excessive interpretation of the American dream (Wills 2021; Ouellette 2010). The franchise exemplifies the complex entanglement of national identity and transnational cultural production in digital game culture. To label it as Scottish, British, or American is reductive: it is all, simultaneously.

GTA's pleasures are inseparable from its hybrid identity. It invites reflection on how national imaginaries circulate and mutate within global production, and how players find enjoyment in these unstable positions. GTA is less a simulation of America than a transnational artefact staging contradictions of global modernity between periphery and center, production and consumption, critique and indulgence. As anticipation builds for *GTA VI* amid shifting geopolitical and technological landscapes, the franchise remains a crucial site for examining how digital games mediate national identity in an increasingly de-territorialized world. The enjoyment it offers (ironic, uneasy and ambivalent) is one that inhabits the intersections of nations and capital in the twenty-first century.

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