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# ***Grand Theft Auto IV* Considered as an Atrocity Exhibition**

MARTIN PICHLMAIR

This review outlines the intersections between Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008) and the British novelist J.G. Ballard's experimental text "The Atrocity Exhibition". Obvious parallels like the dominant roles of cars and carnage are supplemented by more subtle similarities. *Grand Theft Auto* is an "Atrocity Exhibition", a deliberately instigated scandal, and a cynical masterpiece.

Sun sets over Liberty City. Its rays beautifully reflect in the mirror surfaces of the skyscrapers. Traffic is frozen with the streets filled with rush-hour traffic. Even the pavements are overcrowded, passers-by yelling and shouting at each other or just mumbling to themselves. Only my car is moving. Between the cars in the lanes waiting at the traffic lights is always a gap just wide enough for my battered sports coupe. The oncoming traffic is just slow enough for me to dance through it. Although I am in no hurry I hit the gas pedal. Just for the joy of it. The worst thing that can happen is having a head-on crash that smashes me through the windscreen, leaving me with my health bar depleted to the minimum. Nothing that can't be cured by a hot-dog from one of the street vendors. Welcome to Liberty City.

*Grand Theft Auto* is one of the most controversial game series in history. The game is set in Liberty City, a fictional recreation of New York. Niko Bellic, protagonist and player-controlled character, is a small-time criminal with an Eastern European background. In the opening scene of the game, Niko arrives at the city's harbour. Having escaped the Balkan wars he is eager to start a new life. But soon he has to realise that there are shadows from the past he cannot shake off. The game tries hard to convince the player that the path Niko will take is already set.

Liberty City was designed as a playground. Each street corner resembles New York as seen from a car driving at high velocity. The regions of Liberty City match real-world counterparts. Brooklyn has become Broker, Manhattan is Algonquin, Queens is Dukes, Bronx is Bohan and New Jersey is Alderney. Yet those quarters do not add up to a simulation of a city. The city acts as a sandbox. Every street corner is modelled to support swift car chases. The world is built for speed rides. Gas stations are placed so that small driving errors yield maximum destruction. Billboards, radio programmes and websites are the only media the player consumes (though you can turn on the television set and watch mind-stultifying shows). According to Rockstar Games' Vice President of Creative, Dan Hauser (Goldstein 2008), there are 400-500 fake brands in the game. The world is plastered with advertisements. The primal difference between the districts is that in Algonquin, the crooks are wearing suits.

Upon arrival his cousin Roman who runs a humble taxi business picks up Niko. Roman introduces Niko to his contacts who send him on his first missions. As in all prior *Grand Theft Auto* games the protagonist has to drive, fight, loot, and burn his

way through these jobs. With time, the jobs get more adventurous and Niko's arsenal of available weaponry and vehicles gets more advanced. Yet the basic outline of the missions is always the same: steal a car, get to point X, kill person Y, escape. Occasionally, they are enriched by a car chase or a spectacular twist of fate. Still, the centre of the game is the stealing, riding, battering, and smashing of vehicles, be they cars, motorcycles, helicopters or trucks.

In 1970 J.G. Ballard set up an exhibition at the New Arts Laboratory in London, entitled "Crashed Cars" (Ballard 2008, p.235ff). Ballard showed three cars - a Pontiac, an Austin Cambridge A60 and a Mini - from the car dump. The white Pontiac is the stereotype of an American car; grand, elegant, almost baroque. The Mini is the synthesis of compactness and speed. The A60 is a family car; comfortable, stable and slow. Placing the battered and smashed vehicles beside each other showed that the crashes somehow put them on level. Death spares neither small nor great. At the same time the purposeful display of crashed cars seemed to hit a nerve in the audience:

During the months they were on show the cars were ceaselessly attacked, daubed with white paint by a Hare Krishna group, overturned and stripped of wing mirrors and license plates. (Ballard 2008, p.240)

In "The Atrocity Exhibition", a 1969 novel by J.G. Ballard, cars are rendered as objects of desire. A fast ride is an act of sexuality and the car crash is the ultimate climax. Personal relationships are defined as angles of impact. A person can be read according to an X-Ray of her spinal fractures. The ubiquitous personal freedom introduced by cars is contrasted by the significance of singular events of accidents:

... from this and similar work it is clear that Freud's classical distinction between the manifest and latent content of the inner world of the psyche now has to be applied to the outer world of reality. A dominant element in this reality is technology and its instrument, the machine. In most roles the machine assumes a benign or passive posture ... The twentieth century has also given birth to a vast range of machines - computers, pilotless planes, thermonuclear weapons - where the latent identity of the machine is ambiguous even to the skilled investigator. An understanding of this identity can be found in a study of the automobile, which dominates the vectors of speed, aggression, violence and desire. In particular the automobile crash contains a crucial image of the machine as conceptualized psychopathology. (Ballard 2006, p. 156)

Ballard saw cars as the signifying symbols of the 20th century. James Dean, John F. Kennedy, and Lady Di are just three of the many pop culture figures that died in car accidents. Ballard even renders the assassination of JFK as a car race in the essay "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race" (Ballard 2006, p.171ff). Class differences in Grand Theft Auto IV mostly manifest in car brands. The vehicles Niko drive get better and better throughout the game. Yet the great efforts Niko Bellic undertakes to further his status only push him deeper and deeper into a swamp of corruption and violence. Towards the inescapable crash. The city is in a state of downfall, ridden by corrupt police forces, street crime, poverty, mentally deranged inhabitants and unscrupulous politicians. A sign at the highway reads: "The world needs a strong America to tell it what to do". GTA is a synonym for cynicism, Liberty City the antithesis of the American Dream.

The psychotic principal character of *The Atrocity Exhibition* regards all other people as inhabitants of his mental landscape. A part of them is fictional, others are seemingly real. Some keep reappearing even after being murdered several times. In *Grand Theft Auto IV* Niko Bellic makes a lot of friends. From the homophobic gay-ish muscle-packed Brucie to the corrupt-but-only-human officer Francis, his friendships are shaped by mutual demand rather than fondness. At the same time, Niko Bellic's friends are the most forgiving you can imagine. Getting locked up after driving drunkenly with your cousin just makes him want to go out with you again the other day. If a companion gets shot during a mission (and even if you shoot him yourself), he is only injured and can be picked up at the hospital later. Failing a mission just means that you have to return to the quest-giver later in the game, triggering the same cut-scene as when you met in the first place (although there is some variation in the dialogues with occasional passengers while on the road). Niko has arcade relationships in an arcade town.

J.G. Ballard is convinced that science fiction authors should pursue the exploration of inner landscapes rather than be writing about adventures in outer space. Not unlike *Grand Theft Auto*, he seeks to articulate the pathology that underlies consumer society (Ballard 2008, p.167). Most of his novels exhibit civilisation in a state of disintegration, dystopian landscapes and protagonists unable to shake off their past. The hostile landscape acts as an expression of the personal struggle of the hero, its inhabitants gradually regressing into savages. The protagonist is the only constant, stubbornly sticking to his foredoomed path while elegantly sidestepping all dangers. *Grand Theft Auto* also tells the story of a man who keeps his path in a world bare of illusions.

Now this looks a job for me..  
So everybody just follow me..  
Cuz we need a little controversy..  
Cuz it feels so empty without me.. (Eminem 2002)

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