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Digitizing the American West: Analyzing Rhetoric in *Red Dead
Redemption 2*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Arts

in

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Abstract

High-budget, long-form storytelling games offer dozens of hours of content for audiences to explore and learn from. Although far different from sitting and reading a book, there is a distinct connection to be made between how literature is experienced and how audiences can experience a narrative-heavy video game. Based on this connection, there are bridges to be built between video games and literature, understanding how one field can benefit from the other as well as how one field can be informed by the other. An analysis of the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* using reader response theory can illustrate the similarities between the experiences gained from reading and the experiences gained from interacting with digital narratives.

Keywords: Reader Response, video games, rhetoric, narratives, American History, game composition

Digitizing the American West: Analyzing Rhetoric in *Red Dead Redemption 2*

High-budget, long-form storytelling games often offer dozens of hours of content, sometimes in the triple digits, for audiences to explore and learn from. Long-form games, as defined by Amy Green and cited by Johansen Quijano in *The Composition of Video Games*, are “[games] that expect the player to engage with the text for prolonged periods of time” (37). Audiences are spending a considerable amount of their energy and thought in playing long-form games. Realistic video games aim to captivate audiences for tens of hours at a time, but players are also granting some of their attention to the story of a long-form game. Immersion is key to best experiencing any narrative and realism yields readers the chance to better empathize with characters. Critical theories about rhetoric in digital spaces can facilitate room for valuable discussion among players about their responses to virtual representations of the everyday.

Reader response theory prioritizes embracing reactions to narratives and closely analyzing reactions for new meanings of a text. Responses realized through interactions with digital narratives, such as stories shared in long-form, narrative-heavy video games, can prompt players to consider profound questions about social systems, ethics, and their own position in society. Louise Rosenblatt’s discussions of reader response provide insight into how students approach texts within the classroom, while Stanley Fish proposes a conversation between readership communities over textual meanings. The significance of experiences had through interacting with texts, whether tangible or digital, is the opportunity for audiences to learn. However, readers may choose not to engage closely with a text they view as solely entertainment. Video games are considered a pastime for many players, although long-form

digital narratives games offer a space for players to learn not only the mechanics of the game but also real-life institutions that define and manipulate society.

Game developers can find success in telling stories that are based on the corruption of real-life organizations, institutions, and social hierarchies. *The Last of Us* (2013), an action-thriller game that takes place during a zombie apocalypse, offers explicit commentary on a failing society through the struggles of Joel and Ellie as they try to survive threats posed by the dead and the living. The show received rave reviews upon the initial release of its first season on HBO. Video games are beginning to take a spot in mainstream storytelling and find success in realistic narratives that provide cultural critique. It is fair to anticipate that more long-form storytelling games will also enter high school and university classrooms, as some already have. Therefore, a spotlight must shine on a game that has a similar hold on the gaming community and beyond, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*). The sequel to Rockstar's Western-themed shoot-'em-up of the same name, *RDR2* received critical acclaim from multiple gaming magazines and reviewers. Fans continue to return to the game well after it has left store shelves. The game's reception lends itself to critique of its narrative elements, particularly because the game digitizes and condenses a moment of American history between 1899 and 1900. Video games rely on players to suspend disbelief in the scenarios characters are put in, but the details in *RDR2* blur the line between teaching history and romanticizing a virtual recreation of a post-Civil War America during the turn of the century.

Rockstar represents larger themes of American history through *RDR2* in how characters act, the actions they can perform, and the groups that are represented in the main storyline or side quests. Arthur Morgan, the character the player takes control of throughout the game (except the game's epilogue), is a vessel for the player to make choices. Therefore, most of the choices

Arthur makes are extensions of the player's choices, barring scripted events where Arthur is programmed to perform a certain action. The choices players make for Arthur throughout the game are weighted and result in specific endings players can receive. The variations in endings reflect the consequences of the player's choices as well as the contemporary stand Rockstar takes on the extension of American themes into the present day. At the time of the game Americans held anti-immigrant and nativist sentiments, so if the player commands Arthur to act rudely toward immigrants through negative dialogue, there are immediate consequences. Rockstar utilizes the narrative structure of the game to comment on discriminatory ideologies commonly held at that moment in the U.S. and, by adding consequences to discriminatory expressions made by the player, stifles the expansion of those ideologies held today. The rhetoric of the game, although different from how rhetoric is presented through a text, persuades players to make moral choices while they learn about American history through the game's environment.

Game Summary

RDR2 begins at the turn of the century, the end of the era of outlaws as modernity expands across the U.S., especially in the West. The Van der Linde gang, which players follow exclusively throughout the game, consists of Dutch Van der Linde, their leader, Arthur Morgan, John Marston, Bill Williamson, Hosea Matthews, Javier Escuella, Lenny Summers, Charles Smith, Sean MacGuire, and Micah Bell, among other members who populate the moving campgrounds. John, Hosea, Javier, Lenny, Charles, Sean, and Micah often accompany Arthur in his missions, while Dutch, the patriarch of the group, heads missions that move the main story along.

The gang begins in the north, in the Grizzlies, a mountainous region far north of the town of Blackwater. The Van der Linde gang fled to the tundra after a failed bank heist and deadly

shootout in Blackwater. While finding shelter, they stumble across a camp belonging to their rivals, the O'Driscolls, a ruthless gang that has taken a widow, Sadie Adler, hostage. The gang prevails in the shootout that ensues and takes Sadie with them as they travel further east. To make enough money to fund their escape, the gang plots to rob a train belonging to Leviticus Cornwall, a wealthy oil tycoon thriving off the industry at the time. After their successful heist, the prologue ends with the gang landing in the state of New Hanover, where they live outside of one of the remaining cowboy towns, Valentine.



Arthur strolling through the streets of Valentine. (Picture by u/Vigo_Von_Homburg on [Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com))

Dutch dreams of a new life for the gang in Tahiti – a land he has only heard of in books, but he imagines it is a perfect paradise. The gang plots to gather enough money by thieving before they are met by the Pinkerton Investigative police force, a private team hired by Cornwall. The Pinkertons chase them out of their camp near Valentine. The gang travels further south to Rhodes, a town that represents southern states, like Georgia and Alabama, where they become involved in a feud between two families: the Grays, an abolitionist family, and the Braithwaites, plantation owners who profited off the Confederacy. Their plans go awry when the Grays and

Braithwaites discover the gang has further pitted them against each other in hopes of profiting off the feud. In retaliation, the Grays ambush the gang in the middle of town and the Braithwaites kidnap Jack Marston, John's son. The men in the gang slaughter both families before they learn the Braithwaite matriarch has sold Jack to an Italian businessman, Angelo Bronte, in Saint Denis, a recreation of Louisiana and New Orleans.

Upon reaching Saint Denis, Angelo surprisingly hands Jack back to the gang with little confrontation. Angelo extends an invitation to the male members of the gang to join high society at a ball he is hosting that night. Angelo informs Dutch and Arthur of a security weakness in the bus station by the Saint Denis docks and suggests there is enough money in the station's safes for the gang to make their escape. The Van der Linde men act on this intel out of financial desperation, but police forces greet them outside the station. They evade the officers and Dutch plots his violent revenge. Dutch and his men successfully kidnap Angelo and feed him to the alligators. By this point in the main story, Dutch considers violence a just answer to his problems. His violent agitation is also in response to the pressure the gang faces both from the law and a growing number of enemies. Dutch's perverse responses begin to concern Arthur, but Dutch convinces him and the gang that all they need is "one more score." Their wishful thinking brings them to the Saint Denis bank, where they rob the safes, but are met by both the Pinkertons and the local police force right outside the bank's doors. The Pinkertons execute Hosea in the middle of the street before Arthur, Dutch, Micah, Javier, and Bill run to the docks where they stow away on a boat leaving for Cuba.

The ship is capsized and Arthur, along with Dutch, lands on the coast of Guarma, a Caribbean island modeled after Haiti, rife with revolutionary warfare between its natives and capitalist landowners profiting off sugar plantations. Arthur and the gang miraculously find their

way back to Saint Denis, where their camp has moved deeper into the swamp to avoid detection. In a quick but mandatory cutscene Arthur is diagnosed with tuberculosis. From this point, his faith in Dutch's plans and the man himself begins to waiver. Once the Pinkertons find their hideout among the gators, the gang moves northeast into the colder regions of the land called Beaver Hollow for their final attempt to make a score. Dutch and Micah plan to rob another train, this time an army payroll train, but before any action can be taken the Pinkertons seize their northeastern camp again, causing a massive shootout and the gang to permanently split. At this point in the game, the player, Arthur, has two possible outcomes: he can attempt to retrieve the money Dutch has stored in the cave at Beaver Hollow, or he can face the Pinkertons himself. Regardless of the choice, Micah interrupts Arthur and beats him bloody. The details of Arthur's death after this point depend on the player's previous choices throughout the game. Micah may shoot Arthur and leave him dead in the pouring rain or Micah can leave Arthur to succumb to his injuries as he watches a sunrise in his last moments.

The Van der Linde gang prides itself on being a collective of outcasts and outlaws. Although adult members of the gang commit crimes such as theft and various acts of violence, most members of the gang express that they feel the government has turned its back on them. Members of the gang are further displaced from society by Dutch's emerging violent tendencies. Eventually, attaining their last "big score" puts his friends' lives at risk and leads to the death of three members. Not only are the people in the gang criminals, but they would be left with nowhere to go but a jail cell or permanently serving upper class individuals.

While all Van der Linde members have a gripe against the police, members of high-society, and the rise of a modernity that forgets them, some members of the gang are representatives of minority communities that were explicitly discriminated against in the period.

RDR2 allows the player, through Arthur, to ride with a diverse cast consisting of Native Americans, African Americans, and immigrants. Not only do members of the gang feel as though the government has abandoned them, but for some members, such as Javier, a Mexican immigrant, Charles, son of a Native American and African American, Lenny, whose father was enslaved, and Tilly, who is also the daughter of African Americans, the digitized American government has purposefully turned its back on these characters. Riding with faithful representations of these groups exposes players to some of the injustices the American government and White civilians committed at the turn of the 20th century. Players are given freedom in how they interact with these groups, but Rockstar's creation of a reward and punishment system produces a form of rhetoric that implores players to be critical of the representations of oppression they come across.

Worldbuilding

In an article for *Vulture Magazine*, Harold Goldberg interviews brothers Sam and Dan Houser of Rockstar Games on their creative process for *RDR2*. He comments that their work results in “this seamless, natural-feeling experience in a world that appears real, an interactive homage to the American rural experience. [It’s] a vast four-dimensional mosaic in which the fourth dimension is time, in which the world unfolds around you, dependent on what you do” (“How the West Was Digitized”). *RDR2*’s fidelity to realism relies on the precision of the recreation of the natural environment and technical resemblance to reality, such as adhering to the laws of physics and instilling a system of law carried out by the police, another group of non-playable characters (NPCs). Houser’s construction of the “fourth” dimension in *RDR2* is dependent on an environment that is both affected by Arthur’s interference but grows and changes without him. A man builds a house with his sons in the course of an in-game week,

packs of animals come and go through the forest at various times of day, and corpses decay if left untouched. Arthur's interactions with the environment are not central to the progression of the world he lives in, and the expansiveness of the world humbles the player in the role of a man against a virtual countryside full of challenges. Houser states later in the *Vulture* interview that structuring a game that complies with reality was a challenge he and his team had to face. Studio co-head, Rob Nelson, tells Keza MacDonald in their article for *The Guardian*, "Behind the Scenes of *Red Dead Redemption 2*," "I think we wanted it to feel like an authentic representation of a place and a time. [...] How are people going to be hanging out in the world – and then what systems are you going to need to have them behave believably?" Nelson elaborates further on some of the problems the team had when digitizing reality. His questions are answered by the way NPCs react toward each other and toward Arthur.

The amount of effort put into the level of realism, or the "fourth" dimension, in the game was key to its success. *RDR2* took eight years to complete and remains one of the crowning virtual achievements in gaming. One element that contributes to its realism is the amount of creative dedication spent on crafting its characters. The world is inhabited by NPCs, some more fully developed in character and design than others, but the behavior of each NPC serves to reflect Arthur's position in the world. Even if Arthur does not interact with each NPC loaded on the screen, these characters take different paths across the map, offer different lines of dialogues in varying accents based on the region, and some can offer side quests for Arthur to complete. Although NPCs are designed to adhere to a script, their routines and personalities diversify the player's experience as they traverse through the towns. Most consequences, outcomes, and endings in *RDR2* are influenced entirely by the player's input or lack thereof because of the player's free-will. Arthur is faced time and time again by moral quandaries – whether to continue

beating an enemy or let him go, whether to support women's suffrage by interacting positively with a woman protesting on the town square or feed her to the local alligators. While Houser notes that the world his team created continues to flourish with or without Arthur's input, he also mentions that players nearly have the option to disregard most of the narrative and historical commentary that is presented throughout the game's average 50 hours of content through the "Skip" button. "It can just be mud, blood, and gore," he says to Goldberg.

The immersive world of *RDR2* includes NPCs that have their own agendas outside of player interaction, which adds to the game's open-world design and adds to its realism. This mechanic is seen in some other Rockstar games, such as *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*), where NPCs can interact with each other without player control or oversight. Rockstar is known for their groundbreaking technicalities in making free-roam spaces for players to do what they want with their time. Their 2013 release of *Grand Theft Auto V* was positively reviewed by gamers and critics for its story, game design, and open-world design, which was nothing new to the *GTA* series. However, differing from *RDR2* in storytelling was the concept of *GTA*. Within its title alone, illegal activity is the focus.

While the stories told in *GTA* games are consistently memorable and continue to dominate conversations online, audiences delight in some of the simpler elements of *GTA*, like committing bizarre crimes against NPCs or other online players. Rockstar allows users to do the ridiculous within reason but will send the in-game law enforcement after any user who breaks common sense laws, such as assaulting a civilian. Each crime is accompanied by a star-rating where the more stars out of five the user is given dictates how wanted they are by the law. Moreover, the higher the rating for the player, the more aggressive the police will be. When cornered, the police may shoot the player on sight, causing them to die, but they may respawn at

their last save point or at a hospital. The hospital may take most or all the player's in-game money, but beyond that, there are few to no consequences for a player causing absolute mayhem on the streets. Many online compilations about *GTA* and its modern sequels include clips of players destroying the city and finding pleasure in it. There are few consequences to these actions, which allows for escapism but easily lets players idealize the violence they can perform.

RDR2 takes a different approach to the ramifications of acts of violence taken by the player through Arthur. The player is forced to watch society react to them and have the game altered based on their decisions. Players can take part in the option of violence toward NPCs if they choose, but they are not expected to. They can go about the game and only interact positively with NPCs. In return, the NPCs will react positively to Arthur for his good deeds. If he chooses to shoot a civilian unprovoked, then NPCs will be afraid of him, call for the police, or retaliate if they are armed. Phil Hooker, technical director of the game, discusses the technical aspects of making the reactionary system a reality. He states to *The Guardian*, "We wanted, in this game, to be able to interact with anybody and for them to feel like a human being. In order to do that, we need to make sure, whatever they're doing in the world, they have the capability to react to you." The world that Rockstar's team created is exactly one that players can immerse themselves in because of the team's attention to realism. The computer technicalities of the game are deeply entwined with the narrative elements. Players are presented with a choice to commit crimes against NPCs or to follow the narrative with little interactions beyond what may generally make them considered to be a "good outlaw." The technicalities of the game are the main structure that determines how characters react to Arthur's choices. As a result of the game's technical complexity and achievements in realism, it contains an approach to rhetoric that its players may not appreciate if observing the game only on a surface-level.

Critical Context

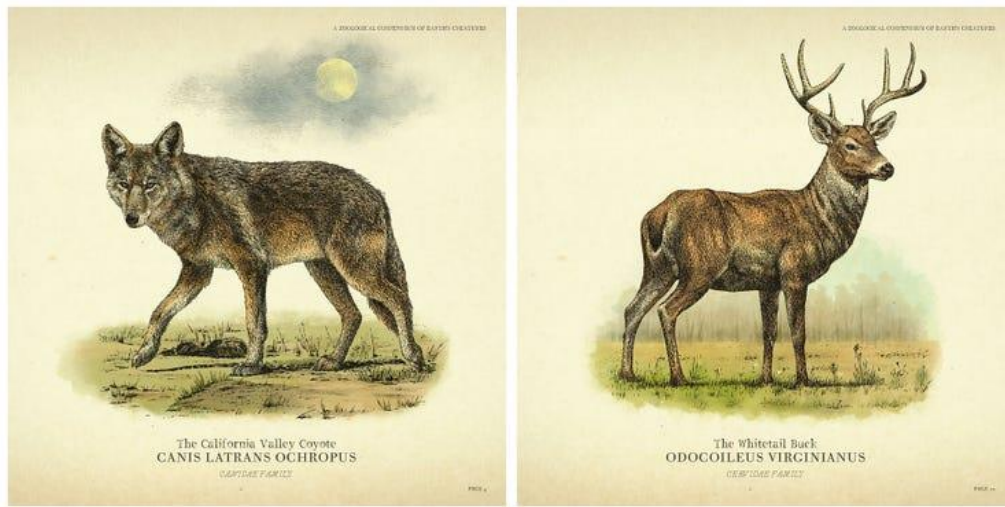
Narrative forms and structures in *RDR2* are just as important to study as the story itself. One connection between the composition of video games and works of literature lies in the technicalities of how the stories are told. Rhetoric assists in presenting an argument to and persuading audiences. Video games that impart commentary on society through realism lend themselves to a literary examination of how the arguments are presented and how rhetoric contributes to collective player understandings of the game's narrative. Scholars who specialize in media literacy and have a knowledge of video games recommend an analysis of the rhetoric of games. Ian Bogost presents multiple comprehensive analyses of video games to understand their rhetoric. Bogost appears many times in the world of video game criticism to share a view that games impart rhetoric that seeks to persuade the player to follow certain patterns and methods to achieve the game's goals. His article, "The Rhetoric of Video Games," provides an analysis of play, of play in video games, and of the ways video games create structures that are persuasive to players. Bogost opens his article with an analysis of *Animal Crossing*'s systems of indentured servitude to Tom Nook, a racoon who assists the player on his or her first few days in the Animal Crossing town by employing them at his general store and offering the player a home to live in. He continues by commenting on the online *Animal Crossing* community. He writes, "This is an important distinction: video games are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented—for critique, satire, education, or commentary" (119). The systems Bogost analyzes within the first few pages of his article are structured around economics, but he makes the point that the infamous debt the player is given in *Animal Crossing* serves both as a structure for the player to make a choice between paying off the debt or keeping their earned cash to themselves as well as satirical

commentary on the capitalist structure of debt. The game does not explore the negative consequences of accruing or avoiding the payment of debt, but rather the relationship between the player character and Tom Nook remains one of business and is one of the many ways players take in social commentary.

While discussing the community that arises from video games, Bogost also shares the fundamental definition of play which he uses within the article as the basis of his analysis. He cites Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's definition of play, which is: "play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" (120). This definition will be the basis for the understanding of play within this paper as well. Whereas Bogost uses this definition to assist in defining the social structures that appear within the persuasive rhetoric of games, terms such as "free space of movement" and "rigid structure" can also help in defining the choices that players can make through Arthur's body, just as *Animal Crossing* players can make choices through their avatar's body and bank account. Bogost's analysis of the rhetoric of games considers the social structures the game upholds and utilizes Salen and Zimmerman's definition to understand how video games continue to emulate social structures within the virtual.

The "free space of movement" comes about in *RDR2* through the vast open-world map, from the northwest to the southeast. Players can roam freely from state to state with little restriction if they are not in the middle of a cutscene. Arthur is granted physical and, in some sense, narrative freedom, which further grants him "free space of movement." The "rigid structure" of the game comes from the technical structure: how the characters are coded, the social systems in place, such as law enforcement, and how NPCs will react to the negative or positive things Arthur does. All these technical structures contribute to the realism within the game, as Houser and Nelson emphasize was their creative goal. The structures not only remind

players of the social structures that exist in the real world, but reactions and law enforcement act as a fence or barrier to encourage players to act morally. Players are welcome to shoot innocent civilians as much as they want, but the law will always be behind to place a bounty on them. Furthermore, if the economic and moral setbacks of acting out are not enough to keep players at bay, one of the endings of the main story is dedicated to players who are exceptionally naughty: Micah, after giving the Pinkertons information about the gang's whereabouts, will shoot Arthur in the head and declare that he is no better than him.



The coyote and buck symbolize negative and positive points on the honor system respectively. (Picture from [Insider.](#))

Bogost's article on the rhetoric of video games contemplates the educational merit of the virtual recreations of social structures made by game developers. His basis for this argument is by considering the tools computers use to present games and their creations of social structures. He concludes, "Furthermore, unlike productivity software such as word processors and spreadsheets, video games are usually created with some expressive purpose in mind; they represent models of systems or spaces that players can inhabit, rather than serving as mere tools" (122). Long-form narrative video games, as well as more casual games such as *Animal Crossing* that lack a complex storyline, create digital representations of real-life social or economic

structures that create boundaries for players to work within or around, if they find a way. Each game has a story to share and offers commentary on a social structure, even if the narrative does not directly reference the economy, the debtors, or the bourgeoisie. Moreover, games are borne both from technical and social structures, and Bogost argues that even the technical aspect of a video game's development and conception is rhetoric. He continues, "In this way, playing video games is a kind of literacy. Not the literacy that helps us read books or write term papers, but the kind of literacy that helps us make or critique the systems we live in" (136).

What Bogost describes and the rhetorical theory he presents in his article is a "theory of procedural rhetoric" (125). Procedural rhetoric, as Bogost argues, is a set of systems and routines that players take part in within the digital space of the video game that acts as way to progress in the game but also represents real-life systems that affect communities. Bogost further defines procedure in technical terms. He remarks, "To write procedurally, one authors code that enforces rules to generate some kind of representation, rather than authoring the representation itself" (122). What applies the meaning to the rhetoric is how it is understood by the users receiving it. He continues, "Procedurality gets its name from the function of the processor— procedurality is the principal value of the computer, which creates meaning through the interaction of algorithms" (122). Bogost's example is *Animal Crossing's* debt system, but within *RDR2* there are multiple systems that keep the world alive. Among some of the basic systems within the game, there is a base market system, where users exchange paper money for goods and services; there is a morality system that affects certain outcomes in the game depending on where players lie on the spectrum; and there is a basic system of law enforcement that aids in the morality system attributed to players. The rules in place within *RDR2* mimic real-world systems to keep players in check, but any form of punishment in-game does not seep into the real world.

While Bogost's work offers a literary reading of the structure of video games, other authors have considered the impact of historical retellings within popular long-form video games. Andrew Denning, in his article "Deep Play," considers the literary effects of including a retelling of history within video games. He focuses primarily on the *Wolfenstein* series, which began in the '80s as a mindless first-person shooter game where the player controls an American soldier who tears down Nazis with various guns and explosive weapons. Denning is quick to note in his article, "Because the genre [of first-person shooter games] often requires hundreds, if not thousands, of grisly killings to advance through the game and complete its objectives, designers use stock villains to keep the player's conscience at bay" (183). Stock villains in this series come in the form of Nazis – a universally hated group that any American post-WWII would enjoy destroying. To hate Nazis is unproblematic, making it easy on a player's conscience to kill them in-game. The game he analyzes at length, *Wolfenstein: New Order*, takes place in an alternate reality where the Axis Powers win WWII and the Nazis have full control over North America and most of Europe. He considers this deviation from history interesting because it presents a commentary on present society by providing an alternate reality and allows players to learn about history through a collision of past and present. Players can find Nazi propaganda based on real propaganda of the period throughout the game, and the narrative makes it clear that each party member is worth killing. He states, "Video games are forms of digital history and public history, not ones that professional historians produce [...] but ones that shape public understanding before and oftentimes in lieu of our input" (196). *New Order* maintains a similar fidelity to reality as *RDR2*, although its representation of history is alternative and exaggerated. The history presented in *New Order* draws from the past to provide commentary on the present,

which Denning suggests is a theme to be wary of without professional review, but acknowledges it is a method of learning history for its audiences.

Thus, Denning leads to his titular thesis that “Historical video games are a form of ‘deep play.’ Their attention to minute historical detail (whether realist or alt-historical) and their often-implicit integration of historiographical debates provide real, if generally uninterrogated, knowledge of the past” (197). The “deep play” Denning refers to is how games manipulate history and time in a virtual space for entertainment and education, even if education is not the game’s primary goal (i.e.: “edutainment”). Referring to the “free space of movement” that Salen and Zimmerman define, the “rigid structure” of history now recreated in a virtual space allows players to move freely through historical moments they otherwise could not access and make conclusions about how past systems inform the present. Before players are introduced to virtual history, developers must decide what parts of history they want to represent and how players will be able to navigate critical moments. Developers are manipulating history, which is further manipulated by the player’s choices. Denning observes that game developers who choose to play with history depict the past, but without also providing a way for players to critique the game directly to its developers, thus closing the door on historical debate or conversation. As Denning states, his analysis is rooted in “the sources from which game writers, artists, and engineers construct the past; and the metanarratives and philosophical understandings of history that the games impart” (182). He acknowledges that the creators of games that impart history have an interesting decision to make in how history will be presented. Historical inaccuracies in-game can be understood as favoring some elements for the sake of entertainment rather than a representation of ignorance on the developer’s part. Denning mentions that the “gamification” of the past influences the present public’s understanding of history (182). By its nature, the

developers and creators of a video game made for entertainment, must decide how their era will be presented in a way that the truth and often uncomfortable facts of history do not overshadow the fun of playing, while necessary issues are still addressed.

Just as every artist relinquishes interpretation of their art to their audience once the work is published, Rockstar left interpretations of *RDR2*'s narrative and its retelling of the fall of the American West open to its audiences. The developers have not included any explicit mention of precautions players should take in using the game as a learning tool to understand American history because players are expected to understand the difference between reality in-game and in the real world. In addition, media literacy offers an interesting lens through which to “read” video games that utilize historical periods to share their narratives. Media literacy is a growing field in education because of the varying and problematic ways people can interpret texts and media. This ability extends beyond reading and writing; it also enables audiences to comprehend and synthesize texts, which proves especially valuable for digital mediums, which are still new and heavily unregulated. In an article for the journal *New Work on Electronic Literature and Cyberculture*, Jeroen Bourgonjon writes on “The Meaning and Relevance of Video Game Literacy” and posits video games as deserving scholarly merit, although “they cannot be approached like traditional text forms.” Bourgonjon takes into consideration the opinions of critics on the subject, noting that they welcome the idea of a critical analysis of video games, but he does not think games can be considered from the same perspective as traditional texts. He states, “[Critics’] calls for video game literacy are grounded in the observation that video games are not traditional text forms, serve as important frames of reference for young people, and require informed decision-making in the context of culture, education, family and policy.” He also comments that video games “[provide] insight in young people's frames of reference.”

Bourgonjon's claim is based on the observation that entertainment made for younger populations is more readily offered through technology than other analog mediums.

The kind of entertainment created for digital spaces often lacks moderation, depending on who or where it is published, so there are growing concerns among audiences, like Denning, about the accuracy of the information shared with younger audiences. While the average gamer may care more about the "mud, blood, and gore," as Houser puts it, convincing players to direct their attention to the presentation of games can lead to meaningful discussions about how characters are written, how the game evokes emotional responses through its storytelling, and how players are persuaded to interact with their environment. Additionally, if players are encouraged to engage deeply with video game narratives, they can generate a dialogue about how game narratives provide cultural commentary relevant to contemporary issues, just as *Wolfenstein* warns about a legion of hate in *New World*. Players attain some cultural knowledge from gaming's innovative form of storytelling and their communities only grow. Presenting a new form of interpretation for players to utilize when closely considering a narrative can heighten how players engage with their games and offer players to consider how the narratives resonate with their experiences.

Critical literary theories can offer new critical lenses for audiences to view the information presented in video games and establish a further barrier between reality and fiction beyond only an anticipated suspension of disbelief expected by the player. Louise Rosenblatt was a professor of English at New York University and has taught at various other institutions throughout her lifetime. Her lecture on the "invisible reader" elaborates on her observations when teaching students who were taught to read and digest texts in a formulaic manner for the sake of analysis rather than for the sake of reading. She considers the position of the reader as

“invisible” and suggests the reader’s position is one of a “passive recipient of the impact of the work, or at best as a kind of pale imitator of the author” (7). The experience gained through the act of reading is dismissed in favor of understanding the meanings imbued by the author. This method of reading is taught to students because of the standardized testing process and, as Rosenblatt concludes, to ensure that students have done the work expected of them. She proposes that “the literary reader must not only attend to the images, ideas, sensations, that the words point to. He must also pay attention to the feelings and attitudes and associations and ideas that these referents arouse within him” (11). Opposed to focusing on the material of the text, what teachers should emphasize are the experiences that can be gained from what is read. Rosenblatt explains that readers can lose their sense of invisibility by becoming “involved” with the emotions aroused from the text (17-8). She finally concludes that if students focus on the emotions and experiences gained through reading a text, what they gain are cornerstones to compare to other experiences in life. Her goal is that “[students] will study, not simply books, but the relationship of literary experiences to their other experiences” (19). Rosenblatt suggests that reading texts for the sake of experiences can offer students ways to reference new experiences. Reader response theory thus allows room for the experiences video games offer to act as frames of reference for students to navigate their lives and choices. For example, *RDR2* offers missions that require problem-solving skills and more, but primarily the game asks players how they want to frame Arthur in their playthroughs.

Stanley Fish shares his experience as a professor reading student poetry analysis in his article “Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Texts in Communities.” He defines the way students are trained to read texts by way of “acts of recognition,” which trigger students to default to traditional ways of analyzing literature rather than approaching it as a new

text. He comments, “As soon as my students were aware that it was poetry they were seeing, they began to look with poetry-seeing eyes, that is, with eyes that saw everything in relation to the properties they knew poems to possess” (1901). Students began to look for the formalities of the poem to base their analysis on as opposed to how the poem brings up that analysis through emotions and experiences relayed through rhetoric and syntax.

Moreover, Fish determined that to read poems in such a way is a skill that is based on “interpretation”: “Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing” (1902). Fish suggests that the skilled reading of a poem can lead to valuable interpretations and result in an active reading community between members who share the same interpretations of texts. He continues, “One can respond with a cheerful yes to the question ‘Do readers make meanings?’ and commit oneself to very little because it would be equally true to say that meanings, in the form of culturally derived interpretive categories, make readers” (1908). Meanings can bring readers to a text just as readers can apply meaning to a text through interpretation. The affect of a text, which Rosenblatt describes as “emotions” in her speech, can produce meaning similar to the way Fish suggests interpretation can lead to the “construction” of meaning. How readers traverse through a text, whether they view it as a challenge or as an experience, elicits meaning from and for readers. Both theorists emphasize the rise of a community of readers who do not search for meaning in the text for the sake of finding meaning but rather gather meaning from their experience of reading the text. Bogost’s case for “procedural rhetoric” also lends itself to drawing meaning from the way video games replicate real-life institutions. These theorists overlap in their prioritization of meanings gained from readers, although reader response theory, which finds the experience as fundamental to meaning, is a method for developers and players to utilize literary skills in order to heighten their experience in-game.

“Playing” History

Experiences with history in-game derive meaning from how choices are presented to the player and how players interact with the game. Denning’s playthrough and analysis of *Wolfenstein: New Order* presented a terrifying alternative history where the Nazis won World War II, but this alternative timeline also presented a method for developers to provide commentary on contemporary issues, such as racial discrimination and bigotry. *New Order* frames Nazis and groups that share their ideology of hate, like the Ku Klux Klan, not only as enemies to the player but enemies to American freedom. Moreover, the enemies created for the player to fight against are representations of ultimate evil and thus monstrous, lacking any humanity. As mentioned, the reduction of the enemies Denning observes leads to little moral conflict for the player to endure when they eventually must kill members of the KKK or Nazis. *RDR2* utilizes a similar system of enemy reduction in how enemies are presented to Arthur. In scenes where Arthur must fight against the Pinkerton agency or officers of the law, a set number of enemies will appear on the screen and will endlessly shoot at Arthur until he dies. Their consistent aggression leaves no time for Arthur to ponder the humanity of the person he must shoot – the player must act. Therefore, the numerous and nameless enemies presented in *RDR2*, whether they represent law enforcement or are members of rival gangs, are reduced to hostile targets in many of the shootout scenes. However, unlike the alternate reality that Denning examines in *New Order*, outside of scenes where deadly shootouts are mandatory for Arthur’s survival, the player has the option of killing any NPC he comes across. While Arthur encounters enemies who are solely enemies, such as police officers or rival gang members, there are more moments in the game where Arthur can stumble upon innocent people. The passive NPCs he

encounters are not stripped of their humanity in any way, unlike the enemies Arthur duels against.



Arthur in a shootout with the Pinkertons. (Picture by Ben Chard on [GamerGuides](#).)

Through Arthur, the player faces moral conflicts when interacting with NPCs in towns, villages, or even in “side” quests. One of the first fights in the game takes place in, then outside of, a saloon. As a bar fight breaks out in a saloon in Valentine, Arthur must fight Tommy, a tall, burly man with fists almost as big as Arthur’s head, to save Javier from a pummeling. Tommy throws Arthur out a window, where they continue their fight outside on the muddy ground. Depending on how the player fights, Arthur will be knocked out and the game will restart at the last save point, or Arthur will beat Tommy hard enough to cause serious cranial damage which players will see later in the game. It is important to note that the player has the option halfway through the beating to release their grip and let Tommy go with a broken nose. Should the player continue, they will be forced to stop by town members after a few more punches, Tommy’s character model will go completely limp (known as “rag-dolling” and often is a signifier in video games that a character is dead), and Arthur’s honor will decrease. This mandatory event serves a

dual purpose: practically, this scene is to establish basic combat controls for players to familiarize themselves with; narratively, it sets the Van der Linde gang as mild enemies against the residents of Valentine and, depending on how much of a beating Arthur gives to Tommy, it shows the depth of Arthur's dishonorable character. There is a plethora of instances throughout the game where Arthur can make moral or immoral choices, and while players are fighting for Arthur's survival throughout the game, questions of morality will consistently reappear.

Confronting questions of morality are modes that players can learn from. The ethical choices players face when navigating the approximately 50-hour long campaign of *RDR2* illustrate Denning's connection between work and play in video games and how players learn from games. Moreover, his article argues for the merits of video games as teaching tools because of their balance of work and play for the sake of public education. Denning states:

Video games are forms of digital history and public history, not ones that professional historians produce [...] but ones that shape public understanding before and oftentimes in lieu of our input. If we criticize video games for placing entertainment and aesthetics over analysis and significance, we ignore an influential medium in the creation of public knowledge of the past and perpetuate a false division between (serious) work and (juvenile) play (196).

Denning is perceptive to acknowledge that video games as teaching tools for the public are viewed as incapable of filling that role because of their seeming status solely as entertainment. Denning's observations of work and play can be complicated with the options players face in *RDR2*. When discussing any game generally, work and play go hand-in-hand. Work manifests in the way players learn about the game's controls and any systems of the game. Play comes from the work put in by learning and perfecting certain skills or systems. For example, in *RDR2*, a

system players can use in combat called “Dead Eye” slows the passage of time from a few seconds to a minute, depending on the player’s stamina, so the player can be precise when shooting their gun at an enemy. Learning the controls for “Dead Eye” is easy because all the player needs to do is press a button, but the system can be used in a variety of ways. Players can quickly exit “Dead Eye” to reenter real-time and reposition themselves, then enter “Dead Eye” again to shoot another enemy, then rinse and repeat. If a player masters even this smaller system within the larger game, they can heighten their experience. However, “Dead Eye” can be used at any time, so while it is beneficial to use it in overwhelming combat against the police, it can also be used to deliver a precise headshot to a horse, which deducts points from a player’s honor level for killing an innocent animal.

Denning’s article also suggests various uses of the word “play.” Players gain a sense of enjoyment in traversing through the games they play and mastering the effort required of them to play through the systems of the game. Denning explicitly discusses the way games play with history, whether through alternate timelines or, in the case of *RDR2*, realistic yet fictional recreations of spaces in the past. Players can maintain a level of disbelief in what they see on screen because they are not Arthur Morgan, but the hyperrealism of *RDR2* draws a fine line between accurate history and virtual fabrications of historical events. Rockstar is playing with history even if they are aiming for realism. Additionally, Denning’s article suggests that the level of historical play of Rockstar’s game lends itself to commentary on present political issues. As he states, “The cultural practices and social networks surrounding gaming provide insight into the workings of the modern historical imaginary and our contemporary culture alike” (197). Denning here is discussing the radically political groups of the Nazis and the KKK, where their level of hate is still present among some groups today. This scenario of “good versus evil” often works

best as a premise for a game. For example, *New Order* critiques the rise of hate in America and its legitimization while allowing players to mindlessly kill. On the other hand, gamers in *RDR2* interact with history through moral choices, exploring the landscape, and gaining frames of reference about enemies through economic hierarchies. Leviticus Cornwall and the Pinkertons are stand-ins for the Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, and their respective private police force in the Gilded Age. Although the members of the Van der Linde gang are not angelic, they represent an alternative side of the economic spectrum. Many Americans felt the growing gap between the poor and the rich, so in setting the player as following the game through Arthur's eyes, a poor man running with poor men and women, the Van der Linde gang is situated as "good" and their enemies, especially those of wealth, are situated as "evil." Furthermore, those within the game who are established as "good" are often framed as Other against characters framed as "evil."

American history is represented in *RDR2* through various modes. One of these is the historical moment where *RDR2*'s narrative takes place – the death of the Wild West and the increase in modern law enforcement. Understandably, outlaws were feeling the pressure of growing eyes on them. Rockstar's *RDR2* frames the story of the Van der Linde gang around the beginning of the downfall of the lower class. Designs of towns, villages, cities, residents, local wildlife, and the regions of the game are directly inspired by reality. The abandoned mines across the various regions of the map suggest an end to the once booming coal-mine industry. Annesburg, a region in the game, is one of the last coal-mining towns in the States and the devastation of the slowing industry can be felt in the sadness and tenseness of its residents.

Representations of American history within the game expands in Rockstar's representation of the Other in the game. The minority communities represented within the game are Native American, Mexican, African American, and European immigrants. Although Rockstar

depicts all these groups as people who have been systematically disrespected and disregarded by the American government, the game recreates some instances of discrimination against these groups committed by NPCs. Within the prologue of the game, an antagonistic NPC refers to a Black character as a “darkie.” The term is an outdated yet insulting word to refer to a Black person, so while the term further situates the period and political attitude in which the game takes place, the term also recalls the social hierarchies maintained by White Americans both in game and out of it. Rockstar does not shy away from representing the injustices of the period. Not only is language used to represent the position of Others within the game, but the developers also allude to traditions maintained by members of these groups. One helpful resource in understanding the historical influences included in the game is the “How Historically Accurate” series by Youtuber RealPixels. Each episode includes a “Sources” list that includes citations and links to newspaper articles and events that RealPixels explains. For example, the death of gang member Davey during the prologue of the game alludes to the tradition of placing coins over the eyes of the dead. RealPixels observes that the tradition expressed is one commonly found within Gaelic communities, implying that members of the gang are Gaelic. This also implies some Irish heritage among the members of the gang and alludes to an interesting layer of diversity within the gang, especially considering the social climate around immigrants at the time.

Arthur and the Van der Linde gang do not exist in a fictional historical vacuum. Events occurring in the country at the turn of the century inform and define how the gang navigate their schemes. While in Rhodes, Arthur encounters Charlotte Braithwaite, a young advocate for the suffragettes in town. She implores Arthur to help her sneak away from her family’s plantation and be a chaperone for the women of the town as they protest in front of their town hall. Arthur, in a scripted event, insists on accompanying Charlotte and the suffragettes to town hall for the

young Braithwaite's protection against male members of her family and other men who do not support a woman's right to vote. His character is also written to be respectful toward the women in language and in action. He keeps them safe from the aggressions of the men who hound them during their protest. Suffragettes continue to appear throughout the game, with one loudly protesting nearly every day in the Saint Denis city square. Arthur is free to interact with her however he wishes, but there are default NPCs who will harass the woman as she protests regardless of how Arthur interacts with her. Rockstar's aim for realism manifests itself in representing many communities that have been and continue to be overlooked.

Immigrant Discrimination

The average player may not know much about this sect of American history, but *RDR2*'s writing points to the level of discrimination people of different races and backgrounds faced. The game does not provide a solution for the United States' continuous tension with immigrants, but how these groups are represented in-game can incite players to reassess discriminatory attitudes and legislation.

Representations of immigrants within the game allude to the American concerns about increasing immigration from Eastern Europe, East Asia, and South America, specifically Mexico, and the rising nativist sentiments among closed-minded individuals following the Spanish-American war. *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration* by Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers discusses how immigrants from the 1890s to the 1920s took various forms and were from varying countries, as well as examining how Americans and the American government responded to immigrants at the time. As Dinnerstein and Reimers state, the United States began to gather more and more of a "reputation for being a land of golden opportunity" (65). He cites that between the 1880s and 1930, the United States welcomed 27 million immigrants (65). Some

of the immigrants looking for work commonly flocked to New York and Chicago, presenting themselves as the most available for work, and Dinnerstein notes New York's easy access to transport should families have to go back and forth (68). However, it is important to notice that regardless of where immigrants and their families landed when migrating, they would commonly form communities with people who shared their background and even "concentrate" on certain occupations (71). This concentration may have further led to stereotyping of certain immigrant groups. Immigrants in other countries looked to the United States as a country where they could prosper when they otherwise believed they would not since the country often seemed to advertise itself as a land of opportunity and liberty. While statistics show that immigrants were eager to enter the country and start their new life, citizens of the country were quick to discriminate. Dinnerstein claims that the "strong southern heritage" within Texas and the Southwest contributed to the discrimination Mexicans faced just north of the border (95). The term, "greaser," language also used in the game by NPCs and Bill to refer to Javier, was liberally thrown around by nativists in Texas (95).

Seemingly, the best course of action for Mexican immigrants was either to return home or attempt to prosper in the States by naturalizing as a citizen. *Naturalizing Mexican Immigrants* by Martha Menchaca cites the 1896 Rodriguez case, where Ricardo Rodriguez, a Mexican-born man, attempted to become naturalized in Texas so he could gain the right to vote but Texans attempted to legally block his naturalization process because of his nationality. Rodriguez's call for naturalization was a fight for civil rights as well. If Rodriguez could gain naturalization, he would also gain all the rights of an American, proposing a case that he was legally on the same footing as a person born on American soil. However, the case itself was chaotic due to the negative attention it garnered. As Menchaca states, the "Rodriguez case was a public spectacle

that signified the antagonism many Anglo-Americans felt toward Mexicans” (162). Rodriguez was granted citizenship under the judge’s ruling and Texan law understood this to mean that no man seeking naturalization could legally be discriminated against based on his origin. In turn, many Mexicans were nervous to undergo the citizenship process in the United States out of fear of both discrimination such as Rodriguez received or simply a lack of acceptance (162).

Moreover, there was little Mexican representation in courts. With little support on higher legal levels, it is expected that Mexicans may not have been enthused to begin the naturalization process or had little faith in it. Menchaca mentions that Mexicans did preside over smaller courts in the state and lower courts, but often as justices of the peace. She reasons that “[a] justice of the peace could not process naturalization documents, as this was the domain of the federal, state, district, and county courts” (162). This lower tier of the local government allowed no room for Mexican legislators to help fellow immigrants naturalize. Menchaca’s observations provide some understanding for why Mexicans felt as though they had no legal support from the American government and were discriminated against.

A Return to Rhetoric

RDR2 offers players various methods to learn about elements of American history, such as the treatment of immigrants, whether they are versed in historical accuracies or not. However, video game developers are not, as Denning points, “interested in the questions that animate the professional practice of history: Why did it occur? And why is it significant?” (195). Rather, what brings in interest and revenue is the entertainment value of the game itself. Historical accuracy within entertainment media will often take a backseat to the importance of sales. Rockstar proved in the success of *RDR2* that alternative retellings of American history have

entertainment value. However, the game's realism does point to a concerted effort on Rockstar's part to maintain some level of accuracy.

Beyond contributing to entertainment, the level of realism within *RDR2* adds to the game's educational and rhetorical merit. Bogost's discussion of procedural rhetoric examines how computational systems within games replicate real-life systems for "critique, satire, education, or commentary" (119). The representations of Others and the Honor system within *RDR2* provide "critique, satire, education, or commentary" on the period and on contemporary history and create a virtual space for players to question or challenge their own morality. The level of accuracy given to the virtual space Rockstar created in the open-world concept of the game relates to Bogost's insistence on player exploration of the systems recreated. The space *RDR2* offers differs in that it recreates an American past that no one in Rockstar's audience can readily experience. However, the choices Arthur must make, the minority groups who are represented but face discrimination in the game, the division between classes, and the oppressive law enforcement are all representations of larger moral or institutional forces that influence how history is made and told today.

However, players who load into these virtual worlds more often than not are not in the market for a history lesson. While Fish also mentions the introduction of students viewing poetry through "poetry-seeing eyes," I suggest that gamers approach video games from a similar perspective (1901). Students view a poem as something to overcome, especially if they are looking for a passing grade. The same is often true of gamers. Although video games are not attached to school the same way canonical literary texts are, gamers view games as sources of entertainment to be used for personal gain and they utilize patterns within the game to complete it. Skills are presented to gamers from the outset for them to master in completing the game

itself. Gameplay techniques are not the only things gamers can master in dedicating time to their play; many long-form narrative games offer collectibles and achievements to add to the already expansive story, which further encourages players to “complete” a game rather than experience it. This “completionist” approach to games can hinder the experience of play and discount the attention that could be put into how systems are represented in a game like *RDR2*.

Teachers have already considered establishing a place for video games in their curriculum. Jonathan Ostenson’s article, “Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom,” presents a case for games in English classrooms based on their storytelling abilities and connection to narrative theory. He created an experiment for his class where they would play various games together and reflect on the experiences each game had to offer them. As he writes, “There’s a place for a purposeful study of video games in today’s English classroom because they represent some of the most important storytelling in the 21st century. This new medium is not only connected to our students’ lives and interests but also represents our society’s efforts to push the boundaries of storytelling in meaningful ways” (71). Ostenson understands games as a medium that students can easily connect with because they more than likely grew up learning stories through games.

Based on the reflections of his students, Ostenson concluded that the level of participation required of video games is far more immersive than the participation gained from a novel:

In a story from a book, [students] suggested, you might become invested in a character and his or her choices, but not to the same degree if you are the character making the choices and dealing with the outcomes (even if those consequences are virtual). Such a distinction seemed to give a unique power to video game narratives for my students. (77)

While characters in novels offer some representation for readers by allowing them to live vicariously through characters and the experiences created by the author, video games allow players to live out those experiences virtually to a level that novels cannot offer. The stories told in games allow players to live out those experiences through their avatar, in this case, Arthur. Although Arthur is a character with his own past, the last year of his life is controlled by the player. Ostenson elaborates further on the significance of the consequences of the actions taken by players in the game, which ultimately serve as teaching tools through cause and effect. Games that prompt players to make choices create a level of immersion that readers similarly access by experiencing a text through its form and rhetoric, although the difference between experiences lies in how they are delivered.



Arthur riding past a random-chance encounter with an NPC, who he can either help or ignore. Helping her earns him points toward high honor. (Picture from [GamePressure.](#))

The honor system in *RDR2* mitigates how players can go about experiencing the game and building their experiences. While all players can enjoy the simplicity of roaming through the map and completing the main story, the rhetoric of the game lies within the function of the honor

system. Bogost's note on video games as providing commentary or critiques of systems is true of the main game's dialogue and writing, but it can be challenged further by how players choose to play Arthur. The system is simple – be polite to NPCs, choose to spare lives when possible, and perform as little crime as possible, and the game will understand that you are a high-honor individual. Rob, murder, or seek to hurt animals whenever you get the chance, and the game will understand that you are playing Arthur as a low-honor character. One of the major elements of the game this meter affects is the main story's ending. Although the fate of Arthur is death regardless of how compassionate or murderous a player is, how Arthur dies, whether peacefully or in the middle of an armed dispute, depends on the honor a player accrues. The basic commentary the endings provide is that goodness is rewarded with peace while misdeeds are punished with suffering. The death experienced is the one the player deserves for their actions. Although the differences in the potential deaths and their significance is only one element of the system used to regulate player actions, the similarity between the two is that, even if well behaved, Arthur is still a seriously flawed criminal who sticks to his principles of justice for an outlaw but without the ruthless murder of innocent citizens when he can help it. If he is behaving on a whim, Arthur's death signifies his failure to uphold his morality and principles against his and the gang's rising greed, but his ultimate failure against the force of the law. The separation between the character of Arthur and the Arthur that the player manipulates indicates how readers can separate experiences gained through characters and the experiences based on their own lives that they relay onto characters. Players are ultimately the ones to decide how they will use their power of choice in *RDR2*.

The immersion of video games, the moral choices players are faced with, and the level of realism of any long-form narrative create experiences for players to draw from and introduce

them to the impact of systems in their lives. Video games are framed as mediums for entertainment only, but as Ostenson shows in his classroom experiment, they can serve as tools for learning narrative techniques and the significance of action. There is a new generation of students learning history through gaming, so this medium is worth academic examination and expansion. Players expecting only to be entertained learn through games as well, whether it is in mastering a skill like “Dead Eye” or learning about the American West by exploring a virtual landscape. Rockstar’s open-world *RDR2* exposes its audiences to a digital recreation of an American past that players will never be able to access. The developer’s careful attention to and balance between accuracy and entertainment positions the game as a teaching tool about history, even if it never reaches classrooms. While gamers are riding free through the rural American landscape, they learn about growing tensions in America between classes and races. Ideally, the history depicted in *RDR2* serves as a supplement to what the players know about American history, but for many younger audiences or players outside of the United States, Rockstar’s American history is the only American history they may know. Illustrating connections between digital and traditional modes of literacy can help younger audiences build critical thinking skills. Players should approach the historical nuances of the game as something to experience, just as any good text lends itself to the enjoyment of the experience rather than to analysis for its own sake.

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