THE "RIGHT" TYPE OF MAN: A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF
RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

By

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ABSTRACT

Exploring video games with a communicative lens is a growing genre of research, one which this project aims to contribute to by examining Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2* with an in-depth digital ethnography. By playing through the game and capturing screenshots and video clips, this study investigated the presentation of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, and western tropes in addition to the ways in which a player was afforded or denied agency with their character. The data clearly showed an embracing of both hegemonic masculinity and whiteness by many of the characters in the game. In addition, tropes of the western genre of entertainment such as reluctant violence and community security were present, though not challenged in any significant way. Finally, player agency varied wildly between very little and quite a lot depending on which portion of the game players were currently experiencing.

DEDICATION

Tbh this is for me.

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I am so very happy to be writing this section of my dissertation because it means I passed; something, at times, I sincerely doubted would ever actually happen. The road between passing my comprehensive exams and passing my dissertation defense was…frustrating. Saddening. Exciting. Fun. All of these? However, now that I am here, there are many people I'd like to thank.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Like many young kids of my generation, the first video game I bought was *Pokemon Blue* (Game Freak, 1998) for the GameBoy Pocket system. My brother and I worked for months and we finally saved up enough for the purchase. Together, my brother and I navigated through that first generation of the Pokémon series, catching and battling Pokémon, always striving to be the best that ever was. Those moments spent discussing battle strategies with my brother are still some of my favorite memories of my youth.

Within a few years of that initial purchase, my brother and I had acquired other game consoles, as had our peers, and a variety of games, ranging from military-themed, first-person shooting games, professional wrestling simulators, and sci-fi platformers[1], to role-playing games (RPGs). We had come to the conclusion that video games could tell amazing stories and enthrall players for hours at a time. These games transported us from the rural environs of western Kansas to the far-flung reaches of space, the center stage at a rock festival, or to fantasy worlds of magic and villains. But at their core, what these games offered was a different way of being. Small-town, rural Americans could now see representations of other cultures, experience a mediated version of living in a metropolitan area, or just immerse themselves in being someone (or something) else.

Nearly 20 years after that first gaming system purchase, my continued interest in gaming, alongside my education and intellectual growth, provides me with the opportunity to examine this hobby more philosophically, and from a perspective from within the discipline of Communication Studies. Video games allow players to actively participate in the game's stories.

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[1] A platforming game is one in which the gameplay mostly focuses on a single character running and jumping across a series of platforms and floors (Klappenbach, 2019). A good example of a platforming game is *Super Mario Brothers* (Nintendo, 1985).

Through their interactive nature, players can become the characters and influence the outcome of the game narrative. A player can fail or succeed as the character, rather than passively accept the fate a different entertainment medium, such as a novel or movie, might provide.

Once I began to observe gaming from a more academic and critical perspective; however, I noticed the ways in which games tend to stereotype some communities, primarily women and people of color (Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016). In addition, the level to which many members of the "gamer" community exhibited vile and toxic behavior became more evident. Eventually, I recognized the often-vitriolic comments other players made as representations of the hegemonic and heteronormative masculinity portrayed and celebrated by many of these games (Condis, 2015). Classic examples of these vile and toxic comments are the commonplace statements made by other gamers about my own sexuality or my mother's sexual activities (e.g., hearing "you're gay!" or "I fucked your mom!" come across the voice chat).

Throughout my graduate studies, I became aware of, and fascinated by, the critical commentary surrounding video games. I began writing critiques of games and sharing them with friends as a hobby. In those critiques, my primary focus was on areas of identity and power; namely, how does this game use characters to portray race, gender, sexuality, and/or other identities? How does the game explore power and player agency? What commentary might the game offer about the culture surrounding its players?

It soon became evident that exploring such critiques led to deeper levels of understanding of the impact the games may be having on human relationships and communication behaviors. Thus, this project was born: an examination of gender, race, and power in a popular, modern video game. So, who then plays games and how popular are they?

Who is Playing Video Games (Prevalence)?

Video games are a wildly popular type of entertainment. The Entertainment Software

Association (ESA) is an organization comprised of video game industry professionals who

provide resources to developers and gamers alike concerning regulations and laws regarding the

medium (ESA, n.d.). The ESA compiles an annual report of the industry's earnings, player

demographics and statistics, and more.[2] For this project, several components of that report are

relevant. For example, the fact that 65% of American adults (age 18+) play video games, and

that 75% of American households have at least one gamer (or game player) in them (ESA, 2019),

testifies to the pervasiveness and prevalence of the activity. The year 2018 alone saw over $35

billion worth of video games sold in the United States, and when including the sales for video

game hardware and accessories, that figure goes up to over $43 billion (ESA, 2019). Clearly, this

is a massive industry with a wide reach. Moreover, video games are no longer simply played

within the realm of children and teens, as was once thought (Everett, 2017). By 2018, the

average age of a gamer had risen to 33 years old (ESA, 2019). Of note, while gaming culture is

often conceptualized as a no-girls-allowed arena (which is further discussed in Chapter 2), nearly

half (46%) of gamers are female (ESA, 2019).

A skeptical reader may think these numbers are exaggerated or too high, but that reader

may also fail to realize how much video games have transformed since their early days (Chess,

2017). Video games are no longer just found as large machines in arcades, or on discs with a

console system. While both of those versions of video games continue to exist, other forms have

evolved as well. Video games can be played by students on their laptop browser window during

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[2] This report can be found on their website (https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ESA_Essential_facts_2019_final.pdf).

class. Video games can also be found on smart phones. In fact, among most of the demographics

assessed by the ESA's (2019) research, engaging via a person's smart phone was the primary

way individuals played a video game. Thus, games are more mobile than ever, and can entertain

during lengthy commutes, relieve boredom during long presentations, or even "enhance"

watching Netflix (i.e., someone simultaneously plays a phone game while streaming a television

show). For the above-mentioned reasons, it should not come as a shock that respondents

estimated that they spend almost five hours a week playing games (ESA, 2019).

To summarize, video games have an enormous presence, one that is growing from year to

year (ESA, 2019). As such, it is important for researchers to stay abreast of this cultural force,

especially considering video games, more and more, are an interactive media filled with

messages about all sorts of identities; including, but not limited to, gender, race, and power

(Brock, 2011).

What Happens When One Plays Video Games (Effects)?

If games are a popular entertainment media and one filled with messages, the question

then becomes do these messages matter? In short, yes. One of the largest areas of study

surrounding video games examines links between in-game violence and violence perpetrated by

players outside of the video game. These studies essentially ask the question, "Do violent video

games make violent people?" One of the initial pushes for the research examining the connection

between video games and potential violence outside of the video game context came as result of

the moral panic surrounding the horror of the Columbine shooting in the 1990s (Campbell,

2018). The argument after the Columbine shooting was that, since the perpetrators of that

shooting played games such as *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and *Quake* (id Software, 1996), both

games primarily focused on shooting enemies, these games may have contributed to the violence.

This early research in the 1990s led to a new academic interest: years of scholarly research into the effects of video games on violent behavior. By 2010, many scholarly analyses had come out arguing both *for* and *against* the games having effects on violent behaviors. For instance, Anderson et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis finding strong evidence that exposure to violence in video games has a causal effect on aggressive behavior. However, this study was heavily critiqued, notably by Ferguson and Kilburn (2010), indicating that Anderson et al.'s (2010) initial meta-analysis featured biased publications and significant methodological issues. For example, Anderson et al. (2010) included many unpublished studies, but most of these were from their own research group and did not include data from other unpublished and in-review studies (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010).

Eventually, the issue of violent games leading to violence was taken before the United States Supreme Court and the court found no credible link between violent games and violent behavior (Brown, Governor of California, et al. v. Entertainment Merchants Association, 2010). On behalf of the Court, Justice Scalia delivered the opinion which stated, "studies purporting to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children do not prove that such exposure causes minors to act aggressively" (Brown, Governor of California, et al. v. Entertainment Merchants Association, 2010, p. 2). However, this seems to hold little sway in the eyes of many current politicians and pundits as two recent mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio have led to a resurgence in discussions about the possible linkage between video games and violence (Whitten, 2019). Despite the lack of credible evidence linking video games and violent behavior, this is not to say video games do not have influence.

While the research into video games and violence filled news cycles, pundits' mouths, and courtrooms, other research into video games was being conducted into the effects of games on attitudes and perceptions. In this area, strong evidence has been found to suggest the messages of video games, particularly surrounding stereotypes and sexual attitudes, can influence the perceptions of players. For instance, Yao, Mahood, and Linz (2009) found players exposed to a game with sexually-explicit messages[3] were primed to perceive female persons as sex objects and were slower to react to sexually-objectifying language. Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, and Brown (2011) found a similar result regarding race. In their study, participants were exposed to both violent and non-violent games with both White and Black characters. Afterward, players were quicker to identify violent behaviors executed by the Black characters, and non-violent behaviors performed by the White characters (Burgess et al., 2011). In this way, the authors (i.e., Burgess et al., 2011) found evidence that video games can influence and perpetuate negative racial stereotypes.

Effectively, the messages included in video games consumed by players can influence the perceptions and attitudes of those players (Downs & Smith, 2010). But what are the messages? Much of the research on video games thus far has primarily painted the game studied with a broad brush (e.g., the game is violent or non-violent). However, a more nuanced and critical approach to these messages is necessary in order to fully understand them. A game is something players engage with time and time again (and over and over), and is not just consumed for a few hours, like a movie; thus, a simple explanation of the type of game is not enough to really understand what messages the game contains and/or the effects the game might have on players.

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[3] One of the games used within the research was *Leisure Suit Larry*, a rather notorious game, as its goal was to help the main character sleep with women, often using alcohol as a tool (Yao et al., 2009).

Dissertation Rationale and Project Description

Communication Studies' scholars ought to be invested in video games, as the games themselves represent a dynamic text "saturated with racialized, gendered, sexualized, and national meaning" (Leonard, 2006, p. 83). As research reveals (e.g., Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014; Cunningham, 2018), games can influence the stereotypes and negative perceptions held by their players; thus, scholars from the discipline of Communication Studies should investigate video games (especially blockbuster games, referred to as AAA or triple-A[4] games) in order to determine the messages presented by the game, and the ways it reifies, or challenges, social stereotypes of gender, race, and power (Brock, 2011).

Specifically, this dissertation project answers the call of Russworm (2018) to utilize research to challenge the whiteness of gaming and gaming research, and Shaw's (2018) call to demarginalize intersectional work on game studies, by examining the ways in which a popular video game portrays hegemonic masculinity and whiteness. Video games have "social, cultural, economic, and political importance" (Cunningham, 2018, p. 7), and inequalities expressed in these games are important areas of study for any scholar interested in messages of identity and power.

In addition, games are a complex medium, but one that players engage in repeatedly and often. Rarely is a game started and finished in the same session. Unlike a television episode or movie that lasts for 30 minutes to two (or more) hours, games are often completed over a series of several hours and several sittings. Some games that focus on playing cooperatively or competitively with (or against) other human players may feature a story-mode that is only a few

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[4] AAA games are the video game industry's version of a blockbuster movie. They are games with huge budgets and large marketing campaigns (Schultz, 2019).

hours long[5] (10-12). Other games, those focusing on telling an evocative story, may last dozens of hours. For example, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014) has a story that takes an average of 84 hours to complete (Fox, 2018). By comparison, to watch every Marvel Cinematic Universe movie (e.g., *Thor*, *Iron Man*, *Captain Marvel*) released to date, all 22 of them, would only take 50 hours (billymac, 2019).

In an era of police violence and brutality, #blacklivesmatter, #metoo, "fake news," and other social movements and issues, games with which players repeatedly interact, and which serve to challenge or recreate systems of power, are vitally important artifacts worthy of careful scrutiny and study, as games are a medium that reach a wide audience of individuals, both adult and child. With that in mind, this dissertation research will examine, carefully and critically, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*), a game published by Rockstar Games in October of 2018 (Ballard, 2018). This game was chosen for a few reasons elucidated below.

First, *RDR2* was an immense success and very popular. Though released in the latter part of 2018, *RDR2* sold 23 million copies before year's end (Takahashi, 2019). At approximately $60 per copy, that is roughly 1.3 billion dollars in revenue from just one game's sales. Second, *RDR2* is a recently released game (i.e., 2018) and is therefore, current. Video games, like most digital technology, move and change very quickly (Chess, 2017). Additionally, cultural understandings of gender, race, and power evolve quickly. With more cultural criticism being directed at game developers to make games more diverse and inclusive, a current game would be the best site of analysis for questions focused around gender, race, and player power (or agency), as understood at the time of release.

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[5] For example, the game *Spyro the Dragon* (Insomniac Games, 1998) is 8-10 hours long (Diaz, 2018).

Third, *RDR2* is a large game, which takes many hours to complete. In fact, the main story of *RDR2* clocks in at around 60 hours of playing time necessary to finish (Fekete, 2018). Thus, *RDR2* will provide sufficient data to be gathered and analyzed for the scope of this project. Many other games would be too short, and thus not contain enough information to be examined for a dissertation project.

Last, *RDR2* was selected for analysis because of the history of its publisher. As noted earlier, *RDR2* was published by Rockstar Games, the same company that produces the *Grand Theft Auto* game series (Rockstar Games, 2013); a series of games so problematic (Polasek, 2014), even those persons outside gaming culture are likely familiar with its content to some degree. Notably, the *Grand Theft Auto* series features a wealth of misogynistic tendencies (e.g., players may engage with female sex workers, then kill them in order to get a "refund") wherein the main female characters are reduced to sex objects (Campbell, 2017). Thus, in this politically-charged climate, full of social movements and calls for diversity and inclusiveness, the question may be asked, has a major developer taken these cultural demands to heart, or have they continued to produce content that reifies existing power structures of sexism and racism?

Potential Contributions to the Literature

While much research exists on the ways simulated spaces, such as those invoked by video games, may translate into real-world actions (e.g., violent video games may prime players to possess negative stereotypes against minority groups; Cicchirillo, 2015; see also Downs & Smith, 2010; Lynch et al., 2016; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009), cultural critics are more focused on the ways in which video games succeed (or fail) to reinforce and recreate the existing power structures of the culture in which the game is created and played. As Grimes and Feenberg (2009) argue, contemporary video game research still needs much in the way of

development. For example, little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which game playing may reproduce or reinforce larger cultural systems. In fact, some have argued that mainstream video games have historically been hostile to any perceived "other" (Ruberg, 2018), although a contrasting vantage point suggests that video games can also give players the ability to become "other" (Leonard, 2006).

Indeed, problematic characterizations of women and/or persons of color have plagued the video game industry virtually since its inception, as video games were born from a White male space and currently, conceptually, they still exist as a mostly White male space (Leonard, 2006; Russworm, 2018). In fact, Russworm (2018) criticizes the original *Red Dead Redemption* game (Rockstar Games, 2010) as a fantasy of destruction that lauds "settler colonialism" (p. 75), or the idea that it takes a White man to tame the wild west. Are these messages of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness reproduced in the sequel, *RDR2*, released nearly 10 years later?

More research on video games, particularly from within the discipline of Communication Studies, is necessary to understand the messages contained in these games, and the ways in which players engage with those messages (Cunningham, 2018). These games are part of a larger system of accompanying texts including "reviews, websites, cheat sites, walkthroughs and fansites" (Bradford, 2010, p. 56). Depending on the video game, a player may spend their time reading reviews of the game, watching videos of tips and tricks about how to succeed at the game, and/or discussing the game on websites like Reddit. Thus, video games extend beyond themselves in a variety of ways; they are no longer an isolated system; instead, they exist as part of a larger web and players engage within all parts of this web (i.e., reviews, "beginner tips" articles, etc.).

Even if one focuses solely on the game itself, disregarding the other parts of this web of accompanying texts' influence, video games have evolved past mindless entertainment, and players now often have an active degree of control in the outcome of a game's narrative. Players can make deliberate choices which influence the outcome of the game; indeed, at times these choices themselves are what players may expect and enjoy the most. Historically dismissed as child's play or mindless entertainment (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017), modern games ask players to make significant moral choices[6], enact mass violence[7], or create their own avatar with countless appearance variations[8].

Moreover, video games essentially exist as a series of mediated messages; messages presented through the mediation of the developer. Thus, Communication Studies' scholars should be interested in what the messages are within the game, as well as in the ways in which video games circulate and/or perpetuate cultural messages. As Russworm (2018), a scholar on identity and games, writes:

> video games are also powerful simulations that produce artificially constructed imagery or data, and like all imagery, systems, and data, video games disseminate dominant values, beliefs, and assumptions in much the same way that "fake news," tweets, memes, and viral videos of police brutality do. (p. 74)

To a budding scholar interested in intersectional identity presentations, and also a gamer, the ways in which video games depict, and/or allow players to perform, identity are fascinating.

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[6] Example: sacrificing oneself for the good of the team, as in *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010).
[7] Example: shooting up a crowded airport while undercover, as in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward, 2009).
[8] Any game wherein players can use a character creator tool, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) or *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011).

When examining Communication Studies' literature on video games, a recent search (January 2020) of the database Communication and Mass Media Complete concerning games and gender shows the research broadly falls into one of two categories: (1) how characters' gender is depicted in the games in a static fashion [and often in terms of sex (male or female), not gender] and (2) a look at the sex of the players themselves. Research on the ways in which player- and non-player characters reproduce hegemonic masculinity is limited, as is current research on portrayals and discussions of whiteness in games. One reason for this focus of research might be (as is discussed later) that the video game industry has historically been criticized heavily for employing problematic stereotypes of women and minorities.

This project seeks to further the work of Shaw (2018) and Russworm (2018) by examining *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) with a systematic, intersectional approach. Specifically, this project investigates the ways in which *RDR2* may challenge or reinforce existing ideas of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness. Within these parameters, the dissertation study explores how the limits to a player's agency may further (or inhibit) a player's gameplay experience. Together, with a playthrough of the game, the overarching goal of this project is to discover what a current AAA game says about identity in this modern era.

Organization of Dissertation Project

This project furthers the feminist studies of Shaw (2014a), who examines video games and representations of marginalized groups in media, via digital ethnography of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. The next chapter (i.e., Chapter 2) provides a review of relevant literature concerning video games as cultural texts, including the research questions that are examined within this project. Chapter 2 also discusses the Western genre of entertainment (such as movies and books) and concludes with an overview of feminist theory (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 1984;

Shaw, 2014a). Chapter 3 provides readers with a description of the methods employed in this research, specifically how a digitally ethnographic thematic analysis of a video game is executed. Following that, Chapter 4 presents the results and analyses of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the project, with a summary of the work, as well as projections of ways in which the project can be extended with future scholarship. Theoretical and practical applications of the study are also presented, along with limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Clearly, there are many people playing, and engaging with, video games in a variety of ways, but of particular interest to this research is the scope of academic analysis concerning video games. In this chapter, the main concepts of this dissertation project are discussed and a review the relevant literature is presented.

Of initial interest is research on video games as texts and sites of cultural messages, with an emphasis on messages of identity, gender, and/or race. Then, the concept of "player agency" is reviewed before providing an overview of the Western genre of entertainment (e.g., movies, books, etc.). Finally, literature concerning feminist theory, as it applies to critical analyses of video games, is discussed.

Games as Texts

Since their introduction in the late 1950s, and their public debut in the 1970s (Chikhani, 2015), video games have developed beyond mindless entertainment; indeed, some argue that games have never existed simply as entertainment, as games are cultural products and, therefore, contain messages beyond that of the act of play itself (Brock, 2011). *RDR2* exemplifies the many ways in which video games enact different types of media. At times, *RDR2* is like a movie, in that the game shows "cut scenes," which are animated scenes in which players have no control, rather they watch as a narrative scene plays out before them. Other times, the game approximates an archive of texts in various tidbits of lore and other sundry information players can collect. This is a common feature of many games and is often referred to as a "codex." The codex entries are writings, audio recordings, pictures, or items that help flesh out the world of the game, but are not necessary for the narrative (Poor, 2012). For instance, a player might find a letter someone left in an abandoned cabin and the game automatically jots notes of this in the codex.

While the codex is not an integral piece of the game, it helps players understand the character

and the specific features of the game's world more; it helps create a sense that this is a lived-in

world, rather than one in which the player is the only being of consequence. Finally, at times,

when *RDR2* players ride their horse over a wind-swept rise and view the vastness of the plains

before them as a storm bears down on the land, video games can evoke the paintings of someone

like Thomas Moran (see Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix A).

Importantly for this project, video games are also communicative texts. The dynamic

ways in which a game delivers messages through story, visuals, lore, and non-player characters

(NPC)[9] provides players with an enormous world to explore. Characters in games have a variety

of identity intersections, theoretically as many as any actual person; yet these characters differ in

that their identities are wholly comprised by the game developers.[10] To wit, in concept a

character may have all the identity intersections a person might have (e.g., race, gender, class,

religion, etc.), but they are constrained by the developers in that the characters may only portray

the identity intersections for which they are programmed. An example of character identity

would be the protagonist in *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft, 2014), Ajay, an American whose mother

immigrated from the fictional country of Kyrat, located in the Himalayan mountains. Ajay

returns to visit Kyrat to deliver his mother's ashes to her homeland and is immediately

confronted with his cultural heritage, which conflicts with his national identity. The entire game,

Ajay is told by other characters how important it is for him to fulfill his mother's wishes and

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[9] A non-player character, or NPC, is a character within the game that cannot be controlled by the player. Player-controlled characters are PCs.

[10] "Developers" most often refers to the game engineers who create the code and program of the game. Designers create the story and characters, while animators draw the game and provide the visual spectacle (Smith, 2008). However, for this project, "developers" is used as an umbrella term to refer to the group of people responsible for the game's creation.

traditions, but as an American, Ajay has a hard time grasping the significance. These moments of cultural conflict may be poignant, but they are programmed; Ajay's identity intersections were carefully crafted by developers.

In addition to texts that portray identity, games are also texts that players can spend a lot of time with. Players return to games over and over, often replaying the same games in different ways and engaging and re-engaging with a game's messages. Players also experience the game in a variety of ways depending on the choices the players make during a playthrough. For instance, in BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), players can experience one of six stories at the beginning of the game, depending on what race (e.g., human, elf, dwarf)[11] and character type (e.g., commoner, noble, mage) they choose. Players may choose to play the beginning of the game six times to experience all six stories, thus changing the context for the rest of the game. Players who play through a different beginning story than another player will thus have an entirely different gaming experience.

Finally, video games are important texts as they create (or recreate) culturally significant phenomena (Brock, 2011) and often attempt to offer moments or narratives of social critique (Mafe, 2015). For instance, *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) has players challenging existing power structures as they work to dismantle a "paradise" of white supremacy and, in this way, the game offers a way to both entertain and educate players (Mafe, 2015). It is these moments of cultural examination in which the audience takes an active role that make video

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[11] It is important to note here that in the fantasy genre, "race" is synonymous with "species" (Monson, 2012). While "race" is an inaccurate representation of the word as most use it within the game; contextually, when someone is discussing orcs or humans as a race, they are referring to different species within the game's world.

games so fascinating as a text. Players are actively involved in creating, or perhaps even co-creating, the messages the game puts forth.

For instance, at the end of *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft, 2012), will the player character, Jason, choose to side with the rebel leader, Citra, by literally and gruesomely sacrificing his friends, or will he turn that knife on Citra? On the one hand, the heady allure of the Citra's sex appeal, in combination with the promises of power, are persuasive. On the other hand, Citra is asking the player to abandon these interpersonal friendships in the most brutal fashion. Further complicating this scene for a critical scholar, Citra is a woman of color adorned with flashy jewelry, face paint, and clothed in a mere handful of leather straps, ornamentation that simultaneously sexualizes and exotifies her, a not uncommon occurrence for women of color characters in games (Brock, 2011).

By killing the player character's friends in *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft, 2012), is the player endorsing the sexualization and exotification of Citra? By turning on Citra and killing her, instead of the friends, is the player endorsing violence against women of color? Is the fact that the game's climactic moment is one of violence and death (both choices against prominent women in the story), another example of how women are often used by video games as plot devices and bodies upon which violence is done, rather than portraying full characters with their own agency? These are all critical questions that can be raised from *one* scene in *one* game in *one* series. Clearly, there are a multitude of messages to be found in this area to those using a critical lens.

Games, Politics, and Identity

Perhaps one of the most infamous examples of games and culture intersecting is that of Columbine. In April of 1999, two students entered their high school in Columbine, Colorado and

opened fire. By the end of the spree, the two shooters had killed 13 students, and had wounded

over 20 others, before shooting (and killing) themselves (Contrera, 2019). At the time, it was the

worst school shooting in the history of the United States, and in the aftermath, the nation looked

for a reason behind the violence at Columbine. Violent video games were quickly blamed and a

national campaign against the video game industry ensued for many years (Campbell, 2018).

Critics suggested that these games glorified and promoted violence against others and were

therefore a concern of national health. As a result, many studies of games were conducted,

examining linkages between violence in games and violent behavior, but no credible, causal link

was found (Brown, Governor of California, et al. v. Entertainment Merchants Association,

2010). As games have evolved, criticism against their violent content have abated (somewhat),

but a new argument (or question) has replaced them: are games political?

Another important political moment in gaming history is Gamergate. Gamergate began as

a hashtag (#gamergate), when a feminist game critic named Anita Sarkeesian crowdsourced

funding to produce a series of videos entitled "Tropes Vs Women in Video Games" (Sherr &

Carson, 2017). In the video series, Sarkeesian (2013) talked about her love of games, but also her

simultaneous disappointment with games' treatment of women. Sarkeesian (2013) pointed out

that the women characters in games were often relegated to the role of "damsel in distress" or the

"sexy sidekick." Though she fully funded the project and published the videos on her YouTube

channel, "*Feminist Frequency*," Sarkeesian received quite a bit of backlash from (mostly male)

gamers who saw this criticism as an unfair indictment against their hobby (Sherr & Carson,

2017). This backlash mostly took the form of anonymous internet threats against Sarkeesian,

something that was becoming startlingly easy to do given the rise of social media platforms.

Eventually, it went beyond the hashtag and simply became known as Gamergate.

The next stage in Gamergate took place in 2013, when Zoe Quinn, an independent game developer and woman, released *Depression Quest* (The Quinnspiracy, 2013). In collaboration with Patrick Lindsey and musician Isaac Shankler (both men), the game came about because of Zoe and Patrick's struggle with depression. The creators "conceived *Depression Quest* as an interactive novel in which the player's choices would be strictly limited to simulate the feelings of hopelessness and isolation that accompany clinical depression" (Huffman, 2014, para. 13). The game (i.e., *Depression Quest*) received critical reviews upon release, but Quinn (like Sarkeesian, mentioned above) began receiving violent messages and other sorts of online abuse from, again, mostly male gamers who argued that *Depression Quest* (The Quinnspiracy, 2013) was not a "real" video game. Neither of her collaborators received the same attention, presumably as they were both men, and much of the abuse Quinn received was rooted in the terms and language of gender violence (i.e., she would regularly receive rape threats; Valenti, 2017).

This abuse against Quinn evolved in 2014, as a recently dumped young man named Eron Gjoni posted a 9000-word blog about his ex-girlfriend: Zoe Quinn. In the blog, Gjoni alleged Quinn had exchanged sexual favors to gaming journalists in return for favorable reviews of her games (Lewis, 2015). This led to an outcry among gamers on social media and a renewed crusade against Quinn. This time, however, Quinn's critics positioned themselves as campaigning for more ethical gaming journalism (Huffman, 2014). Also, around this time, the online vitriol directed at Sarkeesian, which had not disappeared in the interim, picked up as well and spread to other women in the gaming industry, as well as their allies, as if it were a misogynistic plague (Sherr & Carson, 2017). Consequently, a game was produced (i.e., *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*) in which players punched Sarkeesian's face until it was bloodied and broken,

conference presentations were cancelled because of death threats, personal information including addresses of the targets of the abuse were released online (referred to as doxing), and the harassed were often subjected to threats of physical and sexual violence (Lewis, 2015).

While the height of Gamergate was 2014, and the furor has since subsided, or rather shifted focus, the effects of Gamergate are still being felt. The proponents of Gamergate gave rise to a new political movement, one who has weaponized online hate: the alt-right. Utilizing the same online mob tactics refined in the trenches of Gamergate, the alt-right became adept at attacking "biased" journalists and critics of President Trump. For instance, critics of Trump were attacked online with anti-Semitic messages or sent rape and death threats. One journalist, NBC's Katy Tur, had to be escorted from a rally by Secret Service due to safety concerns (Sherr & Carson, 2017). While online platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have been working to remove the hate speech of such users from their sites, they often run into the issue that the same vitriolic rhetoric once used by anonymous online posters is being echoed in the highest legislative and executive offices of the United States. For instance, in 2019 an anonymous Twitter employee admitted that the algorithm developed to identify white supremacist speech on Twitter's platform has had its release delayed, as its programming would flag the accounts of many Republican politicians for containing hate speech (Cox & Koebler, 2019).

Masculinity and whiteness. This years-long controversy is clearly tied to hegemonic masculinity in that much of the uproar around "gaming journalism" was the result of wounded masculinity rather than ethical principles. Hegemonic masculinity, popularly known as toxic masculinity, is a type of masculinity that is understood as a set of masculine behaviors atop a hierarchy of gender rather than a single salient identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In

addition, aggression, self-reliance, and competitiveness are featured components of this masculine process (Kelly, 2016). Hegemonic masculinity features "overt displays of force and power" and emphasizes patriarchy (Hardin, Kuehn, Jones, Genovese, & Balaji, 2009, p. 184). Clearly the threats and violence enacted upon female gamers and journalists fits with hegemonic masculine behavior.

Essentially, hegemonic masculinity is the idea that there is an ideal type of man, a man's man, and that all men should strive to achieve this sort of masculinity and women should be subordinate to this type of man. As described, this man is one that is powerful (physically and socially) and aggressive; one who avoids appearing feminine or soft (Raesch, Lee, & Cooper, 2015); in fact, in many cases, hegemonic masculinity sees femininity as a rival or enemy to be avoided or suborned by any means available. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity also features compulsive heterosexuality and whiteness as factors of the identity (Kluch, 2015). As Connell and Messerscmidt (2005) note, hegemonic masculinity represents a statistically small portion of men; however, it is accepted as the normative version of men and therefore receives a disproportionate amount of attention. This is especially the case when men enact the ideals of hegemonic masculinity by threatening women game developers and critics for a perceived slight. Gamergate was an example of hegemonic masculinity's aggression and power rearing its head in that violence is an important tool in the construction and maintenance of the identity (Kluch, 2015).

As Kluch (2015) explains, in addition to violence, whiteness is another tool in the creation of hegemonic masculinity. As such, this dissertation study examines the depictions and messages concerning race, specifically whiteness, within *RDR2*. Like hegemonic masculinity, whiteness is a social creation embedded within a hierarchy. While hegemonic masculinity

fortifies power for men, whiteness secures "symbolic and material privileges for Whites"

(Asante, 2019, p. 485). Another way in which whiteness echoes hegemonic masculinity is that it

exerts force over other (non-White) identities in the hierarchy while diverting attention from its

own power (Chidester, 2008). Whiteness is seen as the norm, an ethnically superior yet overall

neutral identity marker against which other racial identities are measured and compared

(Heavner, 2007; Tierney, 2006). Whiteness is silent and unidentified, allowing it to operate

without racial meaning, but while wielding immense social power (O'Hara, 2013).

Thus, as persons of color exist only in relation to whiteness, in a fictional world operating

within structures and systems of whiteness, video game characters of color will likely be

underdeveloped (Dubrofsky & Ryalls, 2014). Though *RDR2* features characters of many races,

the protagonist is a White man. As such, this project focuses its analysis on those identities:

masculinity and whiteness.

All of the above is to say that video games are clearly tied to the political. Despite the

claim by developers that their games are apolitical, and the professed desire by gamers that their

entertainment be apolitical (Condis, 2015), the fact is that Sicart (2011) had it right in noting that

game play is both personal and political. A developer who programs a game cannot divorce

themselves, and their programming decisions, from the politics and culture in which the game is

created, just as a player of a particular game cannot remove themselves from the cultural context

in which they play the game.

For example, in *Far Cry 5*[12] (Ubisoft, 2018), players take on the role of a sheriff's deputy

in a rural Montana county struggling to reestablish order following a hostile takeover by a local

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[12] Ubisoft's CEO has gone on record to say that, despite their clear political themes, Ubisoft's
games are not intended as political statements (Stuart, 2018).

religious cult. The fact that the PC (i.e., player-controlled character) in *Far Cry 5* is a law-enforcement agent casts the entire game of "find cultists and kill cultists" in a concerning light during this age of heightened national awareness of police brutality. As games create and recreate portions of the culture which crafts them, and thus cannot be wholly divorced from that culture (Nevarro-Remesal, 2018), these portrayals of mass violence by a law enforcement officer are problematic at best, and actively encouraging these types of violence at worst.

The argument that games should simply be entertainment and apolitical holds little weight, as any crafted product is inherently representative of the creator's politics. Thus, as games do not spring fully formed from the existential ether, they are innately political, as they represent and reiterate the often-political decisions of the developers. Player characters, and non-player characters alike, are not genderless, sexless, raceless, bodiless existences, and games themselves do not represent an identity-less, equal playing field (Jensen & de Castell, 2010). Player characters are most often White, straight, cisgender males; while people of color, and especially women, most often serve as mere sidekicks, plot devices, or obstacles for the player character to overcome, usually with murder.

For example, in *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), players enter a fictional country in Africa to combat a plague of zombie-like creatures. *Resident Evil 5* faced harsh criticism, in that the primary player character was a White man and the zombie-like creatures were all Black people. The fact that players wantonly slaughtered a terrifying "other" represented by the bodies of Black Africans, while embodying a White non-African man, brought up many conversations in the gaming community concerning the nature of politics and representation in video games (Brock, 2011). While some games may not seem overtly political, *Resident Evil 5* was received

as a glaring political statement that portrayed Africans as inhuman, bestial, and violent (Brock, 2011) and as a fairly explicit endorsement of whiteness.

Further, regarding video games as apolitical only serves to ignore the systems of power they may end up (re-)producing (Kirkland, 2005). Indeed, video games can challenge or recreate systemic beliefs about identities such as hegemonic masculinity and whiteness; beliefs the games themselves have played a part in disseminating. The video gaming industry has been criticized heavily in the past decade for perpetuating problematic stereotypes concerning women and minorities.[13] These problematic representations matter, as they can interrogate, or reify, existing power structures (Mafe, 2015). There is some evidence that these representations are improving (Lynch et al., 2016), but what about video games from companies who have a long history of producing troubling or problematic games? *RDR2* is produced by Rockstar Games, the same company that has produced the *Grand Theft Auto* series, a series of games so violent and troubling that even those outside the gaming world are familiar with its content. One recurring feature of the game is a trove of misogynistic tendencies (e.g., players may engage with female sex workers before killing the workers for a refund and the main female characters are reduced to shrewish sex objects; Campbell, 2017).

As a reminder from Chapter 1, I have opted to utilize *RDR2* as the focus of this dissertation study because of its enormous popularity and success, its expansive world, and the history of the game publisher. *RDR2* is a large enough game to provide sufficient data for this project and its popularity indicates that the messages are being widely disseminated, and therefore, is worthy of scholarly scrutiny and careful study. Finally, the game's publisher (i.e.,

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[13] These issues have existed since the inception of gaming, but the criticism has grown and become especially prevalent in the last decade (Shaw, 2014a).

Rockstar Games) has a history of problematic characterizations in their games (e.g., the *Grand Theft Auto* series), but after a new wave of cultural criticism directed at video games, did Rockstar Games change anything in their latest AAA release (i.e., *RDR2*)? Thus, this examination of games as texts, embedded with cultural and sexual politics, indicates the necessity for the following research question:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How are masculinity and whiteness discursively constructed through the programmed interactions of the characters of *RDR2*?

Games, Power, and Agency

Video games are often predicated on the idea that, as the player character advances through the game, they become more adept at achieving the game's goals. Thus, the game's goals become more difficult over time, to challenge players. One common way to show this PC (i.e., player-controlled character) progression is for a character to "level up" or become more powerful. To achieve the next goal, or access certain necessary items, PCs may need to progress to a certain character level. This is a common method in games with a role-playing element, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004).

In other games, PCs do not level up as such, as the game grants them access to certain skills after particular milestones have been met. For instance, in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Studios, 2009), players are granted access to new Bat-gadgets as they progress through the story, often just in time to solve a puzzle utilizing a newfound tool, such as a grappling hook or a foam spray to slow enemies. These only represent two manners by which PCs progress, but in both cases, the PCs become more powerful and more suited to navigate the game's world over time.

Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games, 2018) is considered an open-world game. Games of this type are set upon the foundation of player choice and agency; the idea is the game's world is totally open to players. Players control a character (or sometimes several characters, depending on the genre) and are presented with a multitude of options concerning character progression. This is partially in line with Gibson's (1986) idea of affordances and understanding the possibilities of action in an environment. In this case, technology shapes, and is shaped by, the way humans use it (Witteborn, 2018). Shin (2019) describes this shaped/shaping concept as the relationship between user (player) and the object (game). This can take the form of players interacting with an open-world game in a variety of ways, but it can also include players "modding" (modifying) the game in order to experience it in *new* ways; all of which is bound by the game itself. Even with open world games, modders must operate using the basic foundation provided by the artifact, the game, itself. Thus, games shape, and are shaped by, those who play them.

For example, within these types of open world video games, there usually exists a "main" story, which advances the overall narrative of the game. To draw a parallel to television, think of a video game's story as the main plot of a television series. The main story of such a game often consists of "story missions," in which the player essentially controls the character through a scene in the plot. In addition, characters may come across side quests which are shorter, more self-contained stories or tasks; ones which do not really interact with the larger game narrative. Returning again to television, these side quests would be other scenes in which the player controls the character, but these scenes might not tie to the larger plot, they exist as separate sub-plots. There are also usually different activities existing outside any narrative structure which may offer experiences or items to characters. Such activities might include exploring a forgotten

crypt or following a treasure map; neither has a story attached but may provide the player with reward. However, a player might choose to forgo all of these activities and simply wander the world and explore. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018) consists of such an open-world concept, in which players can perform story missions, thus continuing the story, complete side quests, go hunting or fishing, rob people or trains, collect dinosaur bones or cave paintings, or simply ride a horse through the wilderness (Shaikh, 2018).

As mentioned above, open-world games are premised upon the idea that giving players more choices and agency is desirable. Therefore, open-world games usually have very little instruction on how to navigate the game in terms of progression; instead players may continue to play through the story missions, explore the world, collect resources to craft items with (e.g., meals, satchels, clothes), or a multitude of other activities. Thus, these technological affordances invite players to take part in a variety of activities, those bound within the game (Yoon, 2015).

Interestingly, *RDR2* tries to present players with a *perception* of limitless choice and freedom, but this is simply not the reality. As Nevarro-Remesal (2018, p. 179) points out, open-world games actually present players with "directed freedom," or freedom with certain bounds. For instance, in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), one of the most lauded open-world games to date, should players choose, they may go on murderous rampages, killing all non-player characters in an area. However, in *Skyrim*, certain NPCs (i.e., non-player-controlled characters) are protected and cannot be killed due to their integral nature in the progression of some missions. Essentially, some quests require interacting with specific NPCs and, without this interaction, the quest could not progress. Thus, in *Skyrim*, if a player killed one of those NPCs, the quest would be impossible, so the developers gave those NPCs a "protected status" to ensure players would have the capability to eventually complete the quest. In this

instance (*Skyrim*), the developers have instilled limitations on the player's choice and, thus, the

player's freedom or agency is not boundless.[14]

Returning to *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft, 2018), players are placed in a large open world and are

asked to free its citizens from the oppression of a powerful cult. However, at several specific

points in the game's main story, all player agency is stripped, and the game forces players into a

scripted story scene. Essentially, as players reach certain benchmarks in the main story, the

antagonists will unfailingly capture the player character and a cut scene (short scripted scene)

will commence. No matter what a player does, once the benchmark is reached, the cut scene is

inevitable. Players of the video game are very clearly reminded they are not in a limitless world;

their characters are quite literally at the mercy of the game developers.

Indeed, video game players "are not passive consumers of gaming content, rather they are

active participants in both the behaviors of characters and the story itself" (Kondrat, 2015, p.

176). Players have always had control over a portion of the game, but more modern games have

begun pushing the boundaries of that control further and further. For instance, in *RDR2*, the

protagonist, Arthur, is the character under the player's control, and players can decide whether

Arthur gains or loses weight depending on how often a player has Arthur eat and what he eats.

Arthur's hair can be short or worn long, and he can adorn a large variety of clothes, or even

complete outfits, which can be purchased from shopkeepers or found hidden in the *RDR2* world.

Most of these choices have little impact in terms of *RDR2* gameplay; instead they are

simply ways in which the player can enact their will upon the character and customize Arthur to

their own personal specifications. These sorts of character customizations are common among

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[14] A game released in October 2019 called *The Outer Worlds* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2019) allows players to kill any NPC they meet, perhaps signaling a coming shift in the concept of "directed freedom" (Frushtick, 2019; see also Nevarro-Remesal, 2018).

games that feature a role-playing (RP) element; however, even in games without those elements, customization and player agency is often valued. In a very popular tactical shooter game, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation, 2012), players can win and purchase "skins" for the weapons which are different paint designs than the standard (see Figure 3 in Appendix A). Similarly, in *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), players can also acquire a variety of skins for their characters, which again, do not change the abilities or items a character has, but simply offer a unique way for the player to customize their character.

However, despite all the choices or options, video game players still fall within the directed freedom bounds described earlier, in that the players are given many, many choices by developers, but the choices are not limitless (Nevarro-Remesal, 2018). Players certainly can make a lot of choices in how a character appears and acts, but only within the bounds set by the game developers. Essentially, players are free to dress or design their character any way they like, within the limits set by developers. Depending on the level of detail in the game, these cosmetic choices may have in-game effects, though not often in terms of gameplay. Rather, non-player characters may react differently to a character depending on their dress or actions, or comment on the player character's behavior. These NPC comments can drive home the significance of a player character's actions.

For example, in *RDR2*, Arthur may find himself riding the range in the rain or rolling in the mud during a fistfight. Afterward, NPCs may tell Arthur he needs to take a bath, as his body and clothes are filthy. In a different example, if Arthur shoots a stagecoach driver with a witness present, the witness will try to escape the game scene to alert the authorities. It is these minor, yet important, touches (including the assault and murder), which help immerse the player within the game's world, yet these freedoms are still highly (and thoughtfully) prescribed by the

developers. Regardless, these multitude of ways of existing within the video game (e.g., as a cowboy, a vampire, or a professional athlete), "provide us simulated social spaces in which we can play through various ways of being in the world" (Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008, p. 352).

So, then, given the availability of character choice in video games, particularly open-world games, what are the affordances available to players of *RDR2*? How does *RDR2* empower, or not, a player? In a video game, in which such an emphasis has been placed on player choice and freedom, this dissertation research examines the ways in which that freedom is directed or not. The above discussion about player agency warrants a second research question:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How is the player given (or denied) in-game agency in *RDR2*?

Westerns and the West

As a genre, the Western (of which *RDR2* is an example) exists as a quintessentially American form of entertainment (Spohrer, 2009). According to Brower (2010), the Western is emblematic of America's courage, capability, strength, and masculinity; in that there are clearly marked good guys and bad guys, while women and children are to be protected. The Western exemplifies a few qualities of these "ideals" of America, in that freedom and personal choice figure strongly into the traditional narratives, such as the community of misfits struggling to maintain their autonomy in the face of encroaching government oversight featured in HBO's *Deadwood* (Fienberg, 2004). Another key component of the Western is reluctant violence, or violence that is conducted with misgivings (Kupfer, 2008), such as the retired gunslinger being drawn back into the fray after years of peacefully farming, as in *Unforgiven* (Eastwood, 1992). Interestingly, in contrast to the justification of bringing civilization to the west as an excuse to

displace native peoples, Westerns (like *RDR2*) often show the west as a lawless, uncivilized place; one in which the protagonist struggles to maintain their autonomy (McCracken, 2014).

Ultimately, though, the Western focuses on two concepts: justice and masculinity. The first is often explicit, in that the protagonist's motivation is the pursuit of justice. At times, this pursuit is quite literal (Crittenden, 2018), such as a chase or hunt for outlaws. Accompanying the pursuit of justice is the notion of masculinity, specifically that of the cowboy. Descended from the idea of the *vaquero*, the cowboy, through the Western, became the standard of masculinity in the United States for a time, especially in the mid-20th century (Brower, 2010). In fact, this was codified by Gene Autry's "cowboy code," which outlines the proper way to be a cowboy (Turner, 2003; see Figure 4 in Appendix A). For example, featured among these rules are: do not shoot first, be respectful to women, and be a patriot. Already, we see the link in Westerns (and thus presumably *RDR2*) between the cowboy and masculinity and how this is connected to the nation: a man is a patriot and a patriotism is masculine. The cowboy was the ideal citizen; respectful, tolerant, patriotic, but also someone who sought justice. These became the tropes upon which Western games rested their characters.

Further, the American west does not refer to only a geographic area. In fact, it is representative of a specific time, people, and a place. The time of the American west is late 19th century and early 20th century. Geographically, the American west focuses on the area of the United States west of the Mississippi and outside of large cities. Finally, the American west refers to the people who populate this land (Turner, 2003).

To a critical cultural scholar, the Western also invokes the idea of the "other." In this case, the Western focuses on the White man as the protagonist, the tamer of nature, the seeker of justice, and the righter of wrongs. While an entry in the genre may have a multicultural cast of

characters, it is almost always a White man with the top billing (Perlman, 2011). This is certainly

the case in *RDR2*, as both the main character, Arthur, and the leader of the gang, Dutch, are

White men and a further reason to focus the study on masculinity and whiteness generally. A

notable exception to this trope is Mel Brooks' film, *Blazing Saddles* (Hertzberg & Brooks,

1974), in which the main character is a Black man. However, *Blazing Saddles* is a parody of the

Western genre, the fact that it is one of the only well-known examples of a Western with a non-

White male lead only serves to underscore the point: the Western most typically focuses on

White men. Other examples of Black protagonists in Westerns include Will Smith in *Wild Wild*

West (Sonnenfeld, Peters, Todman, & Sonnenfeld, 1999) and Denzel Washington in *The*

Magnificent Seven (Black, Birnbau, & Fuqua, 2016), but these examples are few and far

between.

In fact, much of the Western genre exists on the idea that the protagonist must save the

community from the "other." Rushing (1983) argues that the Western commonly exploits

divisions among people as they usually feature an "other." This "other" typically threatens the

community and must be destroyed in order for the community to prosper and revel in their

freedom. Indeed, the Western often contains themes of the possibilities which exist for a person

(i.e., the freedom they might find in a new community). However, this freedom is reserved

exclusively for White men, as anyone who was not a White man existed as a secondary or

tertiary citizen (or character). The lack of presence and treatment of women and people of color

in the Western genre acts to "underline the profound deficiencies in imagining the frontier town

as the breeding ground for democracy and freedom" (Perlman, 2011, p. 109). For instance, one

common trope among the Western is that women, usually White women, would be kidnapped by

savages and would be subsequently rescued by a White man (Hearned, 2003). Thus, as Brower

(2010) notes, the "elimination of marginalized characters is morally justified and expected in a typical Western" (p. 50). This seems to echo the treatment of women and characters of color in video games; they typically serve as props or obstacles for the White, male protagonist to overcome (or overpower) in some way.

Importantly, for a study of a Western video game, the Western is inherently linked to violence, specifically redemptive violence, or the idea that justice can only be attained through the proper use of violence (Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, 2009). As Kupfer (2008) writes, "traditional Westerns justify violence thematically and structurally" (p. 104). A notable example of Kupfer's (2008) claim would be the most recent version of *The Magnificent Seven* (Black et al., 2016), in which a community hires a bounty hunter to free them from the yoke of an oppressive mining baron. As part of the hiring, the community member indicates that they seek justice. Instead of involving the territory government, or appealing to any legal system, the bounty hunter forms a band and systematically kills the baron and his army. Indeed, justice is served (Black et al., 2016). This sort of violence is a central element to the Western (Turner, 2003). Thus, the violence exists as a way for the individual (or person or community) to have their need for justice met outside the rule of law. It is recognized as a natural, and morally acceptable, part of the Western's context (Westerfelhaus & Lacroix, 2009).

At first glance, *RDR2* fits into the Western genre very well. The protagonist is a White man whose skillful violence makes him valuable. Any women and/or persons of color are relegated to the sidelines. In *RDR2*, there is a community which needs protecting, that of Dutch's Gang, and the threatening "other" is the vast force of civilization creeping ever onward.

Specifically, it is the law and order brought by the Pinkertons[15] and bought by rail and oil barons. Thus, one of the questions examined within this dissertation research will be if, and how, *RDR2* challenges or reifies the Western's portrayal of women and/or people of color. Specifically, the following research question is posited:

> **Research Question 3 (RQ3):** In what ways does *RDR2* challenge, or uphold, the tropes of the Western genre regarding masculinity and whiteness?

Feminist Theory

Video games are both a text which players engage with regularly and, as stated in Chapter 1, a large and growing economic force in the United States. Despite this, much of the early scholarship on video games involves examining games as emerging technologies, not as cultural products (Reeder, 2016). Further, feminist criticism is often popularly misconstrued as only being relevant when women are involved. As Shaw (2014a, 2014b) argues, historically there has existed a mistaken belief that as gaming, and emerging technology, is a space of primarily (White) men, feminism and feminist critiques may not apply or have bearing on these texts. However, in the last decade, this belief has shifted somewhat, as scholars have begun applying queer and feminist theories to video games (Richardson, 2016). For a project examining cultural identities, such as this dissertation research, feminist theory (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 1984; Shaw, 2014a) offers a particularly useful lens, as it provides the tools with which a researcher may both criticize, disrupt, "trouble" (Butler 2006), and potentially dismantle power structures.

At the core of a good theory is a way to make sense of what is happening in the world (hooks, 1991). Brummett (2010) echoes this sentiment when he notes that a good theory provides

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[15] Pinkerton is risk-management company established in the 1850s who acted as an intelligence network during the Civil War and were the forebearers of the Secret Service. Their agents during the 19th and early 20th centuries were known as Pinkertons (Pinkerton, n.d.).

a useful map by which a scholar might navigate a new and/or unfamiliar text. Specifically, feminist theories provide a manner with which researchers can traverse texts in a critical manner, with an eye to the multitude of ways power influences an audience. Feminist theories are many, but they share this purpose: they all seek to dismantle oppressive systems through an application of critical analysis (Peel, 2016). In addition, a feminist critic is keenly aware that mass media, including video games, often work to promote the dominant (and more privileged) cultural ideology (Steeves, 1987). Thus, through application of feminist theory, the scholar may challenge the power of systems, such as patriarchy. This project's critical interrogation of video games, specifically *RDR2*, utilizes feminist theory and works to re-imagine power and its applications (hooks, 1984).

These locations and positions of critical analysis, or sites of power, examine the application of power on bodies, or dominance and (dis)empowerment (Fivush, 2006). Thus, a rigorous application of feminist theory must also be intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989), recognizing the many ways in which power can impact a person. Intersectionality, as Favors (2016) explains, is the "the way in which various identities such as gender, nation, race, and sexual orientation interact with one another and are not privileged over any other identity" (p. 16). For example, I am neither just a man, nor am I just White, I exist at the intersection of these identities; they cannot be disentangled; no one identity category is sufficient to explain a person's (or in this case character's) behavior (Johnson, 2014). Those two examples, masculinity and whiteness, are tied up in very important ways that allows me a great deal of privilege. In addition, intersectionality does not view identity as static, but rather as something fluid, which changes and shifts according to power dynamics (Michailidou, 2018). This is seen in construction of both hegemonic masculinity and whiteness, as even if someone claims one or both of those identities,

there are "correct" applications of the identity in accordance to power. Engaging in behaviors associated with less powerful identities disqualifies one from claiming the identity. For instance, hegemonic masculinity adheres to a strict regimen of anti-femininity or anti-softness, as being feminine or soft is not manly (Brown, 2016). Whiteness features a degree of wealth or class, as while those in poverty may be White people, they do not exemplify whiteness (Putman, 2017); which itself is an example of how intersectionality operates.

As mentioned above, feminist theory is often misconstrued as theory only having to do with women when, in fact, it is really about oppression and the unjust application of power, which often happens to often involve power and the domination (or oppression) of women. In fact, Crenshaw's (1989) original formulation of intersectionality illustrated the ways in which the racism and sexism Black women face cannot be wholly understood through just examining race or sex, but rather through the complex interaction and intersection of the two.

Feminist theory examines power relations in cultural objects through a lens other than that of a patriarchal perspective, which most often assumes that what appears to be natural is actually only normative and/or heteronormative (Peel, 2016). In other words, dominant ideologies convince people that the principles of the ideology are natural, rather than socially constructed. Feminist theory, as such, questions the normative to distinguish the normative from the truly natural, or the tradition from the necessary. This then empowers a person, for if something is normative, rather than natural, it can be changed through a careful application and/or redistribution of power. Consequently, feminist theory does not simply seek to explain the world, as many theories might. Instead, feminist theory is inherently a theory of disruption and, therefore, change (Zerilli, 2017), in addition to existing as a force of creation or "world making" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 14).

Feminist theory (Shaw, 2014a) is well-equipped to explore gender and race within video game texts. Feminist theory recognizes that narratives take place within a context and, thus, must be evaluated within that context (Pasupathi, Fivush, & Hernandez-Martinez, 2016). For instance, video games are produced by companies with a history of worker mistreatment and misogynistic products (Goldberg, 2018). Feminist theory can offer a lens for critically and carefully examining a text created by such companies beyond the artifact itself to its underlying communication about enduring elements of culture, such as gender and race (Jackson, 2007).

When applying feminist theory to video games, a scholar must refrain from initially assessing the text as inherently good or bad, but instead examine the text with a mind toward its context and consumption (Shaw, 2014b). This requires that the scholar recognizes who has a voice in the text, and for whom that voice speaks (Peel, 2016). Essentially, a feminist theorist poses questions like: "How and why was this game made?", "For whom was this game made?", "Is this game yet another entry into the historical catalogue of games by White men for White men?", and finally, "Does the game challenge that status quo in some way?" A careful application of feminist theory can point out the underlying ideologies contained in these cultural objects (Richardson, 2016).

As gaming takes place in a historically White, patriarchal world, the application of feminist theory disrupts or "troubles" (Butler, 2006) the nature of the game as a product of that worldview (Peel, 2016). In gaming culture, women are a considered deviation from the norm (i.e., a man; Chess, 2017) and this deviation diminishes women from subjects to objects. Feminist theory works to move beyond the early critical work of game scholars examining the portrayal of women, and persons of color in games as objects, to a wider understanding of these characters in games as subjects (Weese, 2016).

Finally, feminist theory works to inform the digital ethnography methodological focus of this study (which is discussed further in the subsequent chapter; Chapter 3). In a critical examination of video games and identity, specifically in terms of race and gender, concepts of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987), patriarchy (Ahmed, 1998), and whiteness (hooks, 1984) will likely prove integral to such an analysis. Such concepts are firmly rooted in the traditions of feminist theory and will greatly aid in an analysis of identity.

Chapter Summary

Video games are a quickly evolving technology, one rife with messages and new ways of interaction that scholars ought to be investigating. A video game can provide a critical Communication Studies' scholar with a rich text to explore, though historically video games have been an industry rooted in patriarchy. This was never clearer than in the events of Gamergate (mentioned above) in 2014 when women gamers, critics, creators, and journalists were threatened with all types of violence if they did not stop challenging the status quo. However, in some cases, the very presence of these women was enough to disrupt the gaming community in the eyes of the harassers. As Gamergate only occurred a mere six years ago at the time of the writing of this dissertation research, and arguably contributed to the rise to the alt-right, it is important that scholars engage with video games to mine the messages these players are receiving and the ways these games are situated within the larger cultural context.

To that end, this study utilizes feminist theory to critically inform, explore, and critique *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018), as part of a larger effort to determine the ways in which women characters and characters of color are portrayed as subjects or objects within the world of this Western, a genre that has historically not been kind to either community. The subsequent chapter (i.e., Chapter 3) provides a more in-depth discussion of the methods being

employed in this dissertation project to address the three research questions: how are masculinity and whiteness discursively constructed through the programmed interactions of the characters of *RDR2*? (RQ1); how is the player given (or denied) in-game agency in *RDR2*? (RQ2); and finally, in what ways does *RDR2* challenge, or uphold, the tropes of the Western genre regarding masculinity and whiteness? (RQ3).

CHAPTER 3: METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter describes the methods that were used to gather the data necessary to answer the research questions posed in the previous chapter. This chapter also demonstrates how this project accomplishes two overarching goals: (1) to produce a communicatively-focused, rigorous analysis of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, and player agency in a popular modern video game (i.e., *RDR2*), and (2) to offer a significant contribution to the growing critical literature of video games. To that end, this project employs digital ethnography, in conjunction with thematic analysis, to gather and analyze the data from *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) (Rockstar Games, 2018). Therefore, this chapter provides: (a) an explanation of the game's context and setting, (b) an explanation of the data collection process, (c) an overview of the methods used in this project, (d) a description of the stages of the project, and (e) an explanation of how feminist theory is paired with the chosen methods.

Context of *Red Dead Redemption 2*

Given that so much of this project focuses on a video game and its characters, it is important for the audience of this project to understand the world in which the game is set. This section details the most important elements of the setting and world of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*), as well as a brief explanation of how the game is situated within the larger *Red Dead* universe.

The *Red Dead* Series. *RDR2* represents the third entry into Rockstar Games' *Red Dead* franchise and the second with the *Redemption* name. The first game, *Red Dead Revolver* (Rockstar Games, 2004) featured players entering the world as a bounty hunter named Red who is seeking revenge for the death of his parents. The game plays out in a straightforward manner; players complete missions in a linear fashion and there is no diverting from the story.

Red Dead Redemption 1 (Rockstar Games, 2010), the next game in the series, shifted from the linear gameplay of *Red Dead Revolver* into an open world concept. *RDR1* was a sequel to *Revolver* in name only, as the two have no connection in terms of characters or story. In *RDR1*, players traverse the world as John Marston, an ex-outlaw working for some mysterious government agents in the first decade of the 20th century. Tasked with hunting down the three remaining members of his old gang, John travels to a fictionalized version of the southwest region of the United States and northern Mexico. John eventually violently reunites with his three remaining gang members: Bill Williamson, Javier Escuela, and Dutch van der Linde. In other words, John Marston tracks them down before killing them or watching them die. Having completed his directive, John returns to his wife and young son, though his peace is short-lived. The main story ends with the government agents returning and gunning John down to preserve the secret of what they had him do. The game then flashes forward and now players are taking on the role of John's son, an adult by this time, and can continue exploring the world of *RDR1* in the epilogue.

The World of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) was released in October of 2018 (Sarkar, 2018) and features brothels, ex-slaves, soldiers guarding the borders of reservations, and the KKK, so the opportunity to encounter troubling depictions of gender and race is entirely present. As a player begins a new game, they are greeted with the following sentences, which establish the initial setting for the story:

> By 1899, the age of outlaws and gunslingers was at an end. America was becoming a land of laws. Even the West had mostly been tamed. A few gangs still roamed, but they were being hunted down and <u>destroyed</u>. (Rockstar Games, 2018)

Presented on a black and blank screen in a font designed to look like a late 19th century letter, the words immediately set the stage for players as they enter the massive, open world of this video game. In *RDR2*, players venture forth into a world of shifting power in the role of Arthur Morgan, a member of Dutch van der Linde's gang, whose days as an organization are numbered, if the implication in the opening lines of the game are to be believed. The story finds Arthur attempting to preserve the gang's tradition of freedom in the face of the peace officers and business moguls who are endeavoring to civilize a wild frontier through law enforcement and capitalism; both principles which infringe upon the gang's free-roaming lifestyle.

Despite being released in the last quarter of 2018, by the end of that year, *RDR2* had become the second-highest selling game of the year (Ballard, 2018). *RDR2*'s success can be attributed to a variety of components, not the least of which is its rich story, varied cast of characters, vast open world, and polished gameplay, all of which combined to sell over 23 million copies of the game by the end of 2018 (Takahashi, 2019). In fact, *RDR2* outsold its predecessor *RDR1* in 12 days (Tassi, 2018). As discussed in Chapter 1, it was this success, and the fact that it is a modern game, which led *RDR2* to be chosen as the object of study for this dissertation research.

The game, *RDR2*, features a wide array of characters in a post-Civil War, turn-of-the-century era, Western setting. Player characters take on the role of Arthur Morgan, a rough-and-tumble lieutenant in Dutch's Gang. Raised by the gang from an early age, players view the world through Arthur's perceptual lenses, and this is the only way players are able to observe the expansive world Rockstar Games created, until (SPOILERS) the epilogue.[16] During the game, Arthur comes up against rival gangs (such as the O'Driscoll Boys), Pinkerton agents (such as

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[16] Spoilers - At the end of the game, Arthur dies and players take on the role of John Marston.

Agent Milton), wild animals, Native Americans (such as members of the Wapiti Reservation), soldiers, and several small frontier towns (like Valentine). With the rise of oil and railroad barons, and the increased effort by peace officers (including United States Marshals and Pinkerton agents), *RDR2*'s main characters, the members of Dutch's Gang, lament the shift of their world from a land of freedom to one that is civilized. In many cases, games utilize violence to further a goal of progress, most often by employing Western ideals of domination and coercion in the name of civilized development (Brock, 2011). As the opening lines of *RDR2* (noted above) set the stage for players to push back against this progress in the name of freedom and individual agency, the scene is set for the game to critique these Western notions of domination, though it may instead simply provide a different method to explore the same well-trodden roads.

The game is vast, and so too is the time it takes to complete, though what it means to complete *RDR2* is a matter of some debate. Indeed, many modern games, especially large, open-world games, have an ill-defined completion point (Paul, 2010). For some, completion occurs after finishing the main storyline consisting of around 80 missions and 60 hours of playing time (Fekete, 2018). For others the game may not be finished until all collectibles have been found and/or all side missions completed.

RDR2 is a prequel to *RDR1* and set 10 years before the events of *RDR1*. Interestingly, the main character of *RDR2*, Arthur Morgan, is not mentioned in *RDR1*. This absence in *RDR1*, taking place after *RDR2*, seems to be an ominous sign for how Arthur's story will end in *RDR2*. In addition, *RDR2* has players encounter Bill and Javier again, but now they're allies, if not friends. Dutch is present as well, as the leader of the gang and Arthur's mentor. The protagonist

from *RDR1*, John, is a side character in *RDR2* and shows no enmity towards the characters he will eventually hunt down 10 years later.

Simply put, players who enter *RDR2* after playing *RDR1*, know they are heading for a tragic end; one in which Arthur is likely dead and Dutch's Gang dissolved. As the game begins with the gang aboard wagons and fleeing the law through a blizzard discussing their losses after a recent skirmish with Pinkertons, it seems like Arthur and company are only in it for more misery. Indeed, the rest of the game follows a cycle of one last heist followed by the gang uprooting and moving camp to a different portion of the world to lay low. Once (re)established, the gang's members go looking for work before finally discovering the big score, such as a bank or gold mining camp, in the current area, which leads right back to one last heist. The gang's goal of making enough money to move west and establish their own community of free individuals always seems one last job away. For anyone who has ever read or watched a story about a group of thieves working on one last job, the last job almost never goes well.

Data Collection Process

The data collection process involved a playthrough of *RDR2*. While playing, subtitles were left on so that any dialogue between characters (not players, as I was only engaged in *RDR2*'s single-player story and thus did not interact with other players) relevant to the project could be captured and stored. These screenshots contained the textual data examined for this project. Essentially, the video game console has the capability to screen capture or video record moments in the game, as directed by the player. I utilized these functions often in order to gather and store a large data set from the game; one which I revisited later as I began coding and analyzing data. Along with these recordings, I engaged in active note-taking processes and memoing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) concerning play of the game and the messages presented by

the characters in the game. These notes provided points of comparison and support for the data collection by the screen and video captures. I created a capture of the game whenever a moment seemed academically interesting to me. Not all of the captures were ultimately used (or even useful), but if a gaming moment seemed particularly significant (based on my years of gaming and scholarly education), I captured it for later examination. I did not record the entire game or insignificant moments of travel between two different story missions.

The captured game footage was stored on an external hard drive and viewed on an as-needed basis during the data analysis process. The notes and memos about the game were transcribed into a digital format, consisting of approximately 43 double-spaced pages of data which were filed away for further examination when necessary. In addition to the text data, I collected 32 video clips resulting in 16 minutes of gameplay, as well as 57 screen captures. The chief focus of these collection efforts are the communicative messages presented by the game's characters concerning gender and race, as well as experiences of player (dis)empowerment by the game's structure and systems. These gaming moments were carefully examined to discern the ways the game was programmed to construct these identities and ideas among its characters.

Methodological Overview

In order to collect this data, several methods were considered and discarded before I, at the advice of my dissertation committee, decided upon digital ethnography. This method provided me the tools necessary to complete an in-depth analysis of a personal playthrough of the game, as opposed to relying on data gathered by other player-scholars.

Digital ethnography. This project employed digital ethnography (Chretien, Tuck, Simon, Singh, & Kind, 2015) in order to gather the data from *RDR2*. Traditional ethnography is a practice which seeks to explain behaviors that may appear strange to one perspective, but to

members of the in-group are understood, through careful and systematic observation (Barratt &

Maddox, 2016). Digital ethnography, then, provides a framework for these practices, in order to

examine online or digitally-constructed spaces and interactions (Chretien et al., 2015). It is a

method of inquiry which allows researchers to observe interactions within virtual spaces (Delia,

2017). In this case, the ethnography is of a group of characters, rather than humans, and the

examination is of the scripted and programmed behaviors of these characters, as created by the

game's developers. The principles of digital ethnographic observation remain, and in fact are in

some cases among the leading edge of game studies research, as a way for researchers to

understand the worlds created through digital media (Horst, Hjorth, & Tacchi, 2012). This

method allowed me to experience the community of the game, that of the characters, in its

natural setting, so to speak, rather than through a formal research setting (Delia, 2017). It lends

itself very well to the data collection process outlined above, in that digital ethnography, as well

as ethnography in general, requires extensive observations, and my detailed playthrough of

RDR2 provided me with opportunity to engage in these repeated observations. Indeed, this

project features my observation notes extensively, as the participants of a digital ethnography,

unlike human subjects, do not exist outside the digital space (Walker, 2010). As soon as I power

down the console, those characters are no longer available, so in order for readers of this project

to access the data, it was critical for me to provide a detailed account of time spent in the

observation site.

Thematic analysis. To analyze the data for this project, thematic analysis was employed

to data gathered from *RDR2*. Thematic analysis, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a

"method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). As

detailed earlier, by utilizing screen captures, video clips, and extensive note taking/memoing, data was gathered from the game to investigate via thematic analysis.

The game playthrough was first coded using open and axial coding, using recurring themes found organically in the data, rather than using preexisting categories (Charmaz, 2006). In this way, it was possible to fully explore the text in order to discover their themes, whereas preexisting (or deductively-framed) categories may have functioned as reading blinders, effectively hiding important data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the initial examinations of the data, preliminary themes and codes were identified. This primary coding provided the groundwork upon which subsequent, more developed themes were built (Charmaz, 2006). While employing a constant comparative process (Glaser, 1965; Miles & Huberman, 1994), memoing was used to further explore links and relationships between the themes discovered in the data found while playing the game itself (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017).

The codes and categories from the data were placed into a series of digital spreadsheets, so data could be sorted and moved more easily. After examining these codes, and revisiting the game data multiple times, the process of developing a codebook for the data commenced and was ultimately stored in another page of the spreadsheet file. The codebook contained coding decisions and examples (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). By revisiting the texts and the codes, the preliminary codes and themes eventually revealed overarching patterns (Charmaz, 2006). This allowed for the honing of themes into something more succinct (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, throughout the data analysis process, I was in constant contact with my advisor, and other dissertation committee members, when relevant or necessary, to discuss the data and revise the information as needed. The next section of this chapter details the stages

of data collection for this project, before the chapter concludes with an explanation of how feminist theory was utilized to inform the data analysis.

Explanation of Procedures and Data Collection Stages

This project unfolded through a series of overlapping stages. This section provides an explanation of each stage and how it fits into the larger dissertation project.

Stage 1. The first stage of data collection and analysis consisted of playing *Red Dead Redemption 2*. As explained in Chapter 2, *RDR2* belongs to the genre of gameplay called "open world" and these games are characterized by very large settings and many side activities, such as hunting or exploring. It would not be prudent for this analysis to include every single side activity available to a player, as many of them feature the player character alone, without other characters. Therefore, this playthrough was limited to the story missions in order to gather the most salient data. As discussed in Chapter 2, *RDR2* is part of the open-world genre of games which offer a lot of player freedom in terms of in-game activities. A major component of these activities are story missions, or playable missions that advance the main story of the game. Story missions can be conceived as similar to small, playable, television episodes. This focusing is in line with the recommendations of game scholars Lankowski and Björk (2015), as they suggest limiting the scope of play to that which is most relevant to the research questions posed.

By playing the game, along with using game capture and memoing, data was gathered on the various elements of the video game being examined by this study. As the main story of the game may take upwards of 60 hours of playing time to complete, the playthrough continued until data saturation was reached (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). After approximately fifteen hours of play, I transitioned to the second stage.

Stage 2. The second stage of the data collection and analysis process was to begin the coding of the game and continue playing *RDR2* until saturation was reached (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). The open codes developed while reviewing the game's data further informed my interpretation of the messages I witnessed during play, and vice versa. Finally, during this stage, the playthrough was completed, after approximately 35 hours of play, and data saturation was reached, before moving to stage 3.

Stage 3. The final stage of data collection did not involve actively playing the game. Instead, by this stage the in the analytical process, the game was only revisited in order to review the captured screenshots and video clips of play relevant to the analysis process. During this stage, the codes and themes were condensed into the necessary categories and those categories were analyzed with the lens provided via the framework of feminist theory. Essentially, this final stage is less about collection and more about revision and refinement of the categories and themes. During this stage, most of the scholarly effort was directed at improving the data categories in order to make them as complete as possible.

Pairing Theory and Method

As discussed in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework for this project is feminist theory (Ahmed, 2017, hooks, 1984; Shaw, 2014a). Using a video game as a site for critical analysis extends the work of game scholars, such as Shaw (2014a) and Russworm (2018). Video game culture is a historically White, male space (Peel, 2016); a space which has been unwelcoming and/or outright hostile to those who do not claim those identities. Applying feminist theory to the data collected from a very prominent recent entry into the culture works to "trouble" (Butler, 2006) that worldview, while simultaneously investigating the messages of the product. By examining the ways messages of race and gender dis/enfranchise the game's characters, one can

work to further challenge these systems; much like Sarkeesian (2013) had done with her videos examining women as reward and/or the exotification of women of color.

Finally, feminist theories pair well with both methods of data collection and analysis chosen: (a) digital ethnography and (b) thematic analysis. First, the nature of digital ethnography lends itself easily to working with feminist theory. Digital ethnographers must acknowledge their position and socio-cultural gazes as they enter these digital spaces (Murthy, 2008) and this sort of (self-)reflexivity is an important component of feminist research as well (Fivush, 2006).

Second, the open coding process utilized during the thematic analysis pairs well with the mindset Shaw (2014b) sees as necessary for good feminist theory; both open coding and good feminist theory require an open-minded approach to the text. Instead of playing the game with an initial and evaluative assessment in mind of *RDR2* as being "good" or "bad," the researcher was, in both method and theory, divorced from preconceived notions or categories until those elements presented themselves through analysis.

At its core, within this project, I sought to interrogate characterizations of gender, race, and investigate player power within a widely popular video game. Feminist theory served as an excellent theoretical framework within which to examine the data collected through thematic analysis. Pairing these two data collection methods with feminist theory resulted in a robust data set, within which resides the answers to the research questions posed in Chapter 2.

Chapter Summary

This project sought to examine the characterizations of gender, race, and player agency within the world of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. As discussed in both this chapter, as well as the previous chapter (i.e., Chapter 2), the game is a vast experience, one which took nearly 35 total

hours to complete.[17] By utilizing screen captures, video captures, and memoing to provide

information for analysis, I employed thematic analysis in this project to answer the research

questions.

      This data set was analyzed within the structure provided by feminist theory. These three

elements (i.e., digital ethnography, thematic analysis, and feminist theory) operated in tandem

within this dissertation project to answer the research questions and, ultimately, to expand the

literature within the discipline of Communication Studies concerning identity, player agency,

and video games. The following chapter presents the findings of this study, offering insights into

the presentation (and construction) of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, and the (un)availability

of player agency. In addition, the findings of this research help to contribute to the conversations

of scholars such as Shaw (2014a) and Malkowski and Russworm (2017), whose work on identity

in video games and gamers has greatly informed this project.

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[17] Note that I did not complete the game's narrative as I originally intended when proposing this project. At the advice of my committee, I stopped playing the game upon reaching data saturation, which took nearly 35 hours of playing. After referencing some guides of *RDR2*, I discovered that, narratively, I was only about half done with the overall story of the game. Thus, after this project concludes, I intend to play the game to completion.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter discusses the results of the digital ethnography conducted on/in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*). The themes of each research question are examined and explored in turn. Exemplars from the data are also provided in order to fully illustrate the answers to the research questions posed in this study. As I wrote in the previous chapter (i.e., Chapter 3), I began my data collection by playing *RDR2*. Data saturation took approximately 35 hours of gameplay to reach, followed by another two hours to confirm. This playthrough resulted in 43 typed, double-spaced pages of notes and memos. In addition, I gathered over two dozen small video clips captured from the game. Each piece of data was examined and coded individually before being placed in conjunction with the larger data set, all of which produced a robust data set with which to answer the research questions. Before detailing the results too closely, I want to walk readers through the opening scene of the game before delving into the first research question.[18]

Red Dead Redemption 2 very quickly establishes both the setting and tone of the story to players beginning a new game. The initial scene is one of a wagon train slowly trudging through a blizzard. Visibility is quite low, but the snow is quite high. Several undetermined characters shout at each other over the wind, wondering if they have left their pursuers behind. The sun has set, the lanterns are lit, but the blowing snow blurs much of the scenery as the band wanders through. Past misfortune is alluded to by a couple of characters, Dutch and Hosea, the group's leader and his lieutenant respectively. It is unclear what has happened to this group, but evidently, they are on the run and trying to hide. As the wind howls and whips snow across the screen, players may feel cold themselves as it becomes apparent the group is hurting. In fact,

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[18] I will often refer to characters by their first name. Please refer to the character list in Appendix B.

Hosea talks about a group member, Davey, who seems to be hovering at death's door. Further

dialogue reveals the gang engaged in a wild escape from a town called Blackwater. This

tumultuous escape, combined with the lack of shelter during the storm, has prevented Davey's

wounds from being attended to properly. Despite this dire news, Dutch tells Hosea that Arthur,

who is scouting ahead, should return soon with news of shelter. At this point, Arthur enters the

game. Arthur is the main playable character through whose eyes players witness the world. As

such, throughout this chapter, I will use "the player," "the player character," and/or "Arthur"

interchangeably to describe actions taken by the player.

Dutch and Hosea make out a figure in the snow ahead. Mostly hidden behind the

blizzard's curtain, players can sense more than see him, their soon to be character, the one they

will control. The camera cuts to a close up of Arthur, who is looking down, presumably to block

the snow from his eyes with the brim of his hat, but his lowered head also adds a sense of drama

as he lifts the lantern and his head delivering us our first glimpse of Arthur Morgan, the main

protagonist of *RDR2*. The man has a strong jaw, plenty of stubble, and a weathered face. Clearly,

this is not a soft man, or one raised in the comforts of a city on cushions and a diet of rich foods.

In contrast, Arthur is a man of the frontier, a strong and powerful man, perhaps the man that will

save this band from being stranded in the mountains during an unforgiving blizzard. Indeed,

Arthur brings news that he has found shelter ahead.

After a brief interval in which the gang finds respite in an abandoned town, Dutch and

Arthur ride off to find the other scout, Micah. Up until now, the game has been a cinematic or a

in the form of a cut-scene. These scenes are usually designed to provide players with exposition

or to showcase highly important and dramatic moments in the game's narrative. Significantly,

these are scenes in which the player has little to no control, though the player's previous actions

may alter the scene somewhat. The scenes are fully scripted, and while they can be skipped, they cannot be really altered while in the scene. In essence, the cut scene is similar to watching a scene on television or in a movie.

At this point, the game leaves the cinematic and gives the player control of Arthur. Small text pop ups appear on screen and instruct players on the basics of how to control the character's movement and how to direct Arthur's horse. Throughout the game, these will be the two major modes of transportation: walking/running or riding a horse. Now that you get a sense for the "scene" and context of the first chapter of the game, I provide details of my results, organized by each research question.

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked, how are masculinity and whiteness discursively constructed through the programmed interactions of the characters of *RDR2*? I first discuss the results of the masculinity themes, before turning to the second section of this research question, which focuses on whiteness. Regarding research question 1 and masculinity, several concepts became apparent through analysis but, ultimately, they boiled down to three overarching themes: (a) a code of violence, (b) strength, and (c) contrast. It is important to note that these themes, particularly violence, are closely linked to player agency and these linkages and overlaps are discussed throughout this chapter.

Masculinity. Again, with regard to research question 1 and masculinity, three overarching themes emerged from the analysis: (a) a code of violence, (b) strength, and (c) definition by contrast.

A code of violence. Masculinity was so prevalent in *RDR2* that the game fairly oozed it. The men were rugged, rarely clean shaven, dirty, strong, aggressive, often violent, and, in my

observation, heterosexual. As masculinity is a cornerstone of entertainment in the Western genre (Brower, 2010), this is not surprising. Thus, the majority of my coding was far and away concerned with masculinity and its expression, which mostly manifested in different types of violence (e.g., issuing threats, attacking, killing). In fact, of my coding, masculinity was about half the data set with different forms of violence comprising approximately two-thirds of those codes. Violence is a prevalent theme in the game and the most common way *RDR2* reifies hegemonic masculinity because, as Kluch (2015) discussed, violence is a key component of creating and maintaining hegemonic masculinity, as is the aggression that precedes violence (Kelly, 2016). It takes very little time for players to be introduced to this sort of behavior. Within five minutes of gaining control of Arthur, players are thrust into a gunfight.

As I mentioned earlier, after leaving the initial cinematic that starts the game, Dutch and Arthur go to find Micah. They find Micah and he tells them of a nearby cabin that he can see light in and therefore presumes that someone must be inside. As the three go to investigate the house, Dutch tells Micah and Arthur to hide; Arthur in a shed and Micah behind a wagon. The game uses this moment to teach players how to take cover with their character. At many points in the first several hours of the game, instances in story missions like this are used to teach the player a new skill so they can be more effective players.

While Dutch approaches the house to greet the occupants, Micah gets Arthur's attention and shows him that the wagon Micah is hiding behind is loaded with a dead body. Shortly after this revelation, the three discover the house has been occupied by a group of O'Driscolls (a rival gang). As they are Dutch's blood enemy, the player quickly shoots, and kills, several O'Driscolls. In this example, as in many others, this violence was not executed as some form of self-defense but, instead, in a preemptive fashion. In this case, Dutch orders Micah and Arthur to

take up hidden positions in order to surprise the O'Driscolls if Dutch's negotiations go sideways, which was clearly expected. This is the first occasion that players witness the "code of violence" or rules of engagement, so prevalent in *RDR2*, as players are shown and told that O'Driscolls are *the enemy*. There can be no peace with an O'Driscoll and there can be no quarter or clemency given. The O'Driscolls are a threat to the gang and thus must be eliminated, according to the code.

After the gun battle, Arthur goes to investigate the barn next to the house. As he enters the dimly lit barn, a hidden O'Driscoll drops on him from above and the two engage in a fistfight, one which Arthur ultimately wins. Players are then given options on how to interrogate this surviving O'Driscoll as Arthur grips the man's neck. These options include questioning the man with threats or beating him, but regardless, I needed to employ violence against this man in order to progress the mission and story. After the interrogation, I am given the choice to strangle the man to death or let him go. I choose to let the man run off into the winter's night through the knee-deep snow.

After letting the surviving O'Driscoll run away, Arthur is drawn to shouting in the cabin and enters to find an example of gendered violence as Micah harasses the surviving member of the homestead, Mrs. Sadie Adler. Mrs. Adler's husband (the body in the wagon) was murdered by the O'Driscoll gang members Arthur (the player) just fought and killed, so she is understandably distraught. She is clothed only in a flimsy nightgown, despite the frigid temperatures outside, and is being accosted by Micah who has an ugly leer on his face. Here the game very explicitly shows the player the difference between Dutch and Micah's personality: Micah's ill-intent towards Sadie is clear through his actions and aggressive posturing. He is a violent, reckless person who intends some sort of harm for Sadie. Dutch, on the other hand, is

cool-headed and calming. Sadie keeps circling the table, keeping it between her and Micah, her

savior-turned attacker, but then Micah upends the table in order to reach his prize. This action

causes a lit lantern to burst against the curtains and set the house on fire. Dutch chastises Micah,

getting the man under control, and then Dutch calms Sadie, convincing her to come with the

three men back to their camp as her house is about to burn down. The four characters, Dutch,

Arthur, Micah, and Sadie, ride back to camp as the Adler homestead burns behind them and the

snow covers the bodies of Mr. Adler and the O'Driscolls.

At this point, it is important for me to briefly explain the phrase "code of violence." This

is the phrase I have chosen to use to classify this theme of violent masculinity, as the game

clearly shows players that there is an "acceptable" sort of violence in playing the game.

Essentially, in many parts of the game, players of *RDR2* are given choices about how to behave.

Often, these choices result in violence of some sort, such as a shootout or fistfight. However,

based on the dialogue of the other characters and, indeed, some of Arthur's own scripted lines,

the player is shown that some violence is acceptable, and some is not. These often-implicit rules

regarding acceptable violence are what creates the "code of violence." For instance, beating and

choking the surviving O'Driscoll is part of the mission and no negatives result from the

interaction, thus this must be an acceptable application of violence. However, Micah's violence

towards Mrs. Adler is unacceptable as evidenced by the resulting fire and the danger presented to

the three members of Dutch's Gang (i.e., Dutch, Arthur, and Micah). This idea of "acceptable"

or "correct" violence is an idea that is present throughout the game and one I will discuss further

in this chapter. Essentially, players are shown that some violence is acceptable such as torturing

a prisoner to gain important information about the gang's enemies. However, other violence is

not acceptable, largely violence which puts the gang at risk. At the end of this section, I provide the principles of the "code of violence" that I discovered.

At this point, the first several scenes in the game consist of players directly controlling Arthur or watching cut scenes in which the player does not control the character but observes the programmed interactions of the characters involved. Therefore, during the first 15 *playable* minutes of *RDR2*, players kill several members of a rival gang before the player character brutally interrogates the surviving member through strategic threats and/or beating. Then Micah, a supposed ally, assaults the woman the player just rescued (i.e., Mrs. Sadie Adler) and manages to set the house on fire while doing so, endangering the lives of everyone there. Dutch, the leader and voice of reason, calms everyone and Dutch, Arthur, and Micah ride back to camp with a new gang member: Sadie. The violence is rapid and is mostly scripted or part of the story mission. Micah's attack on Sadie, for instance, is a cut scene, with no input from the player. All of these violent acts take place in close conjunction with each other and within the introduction to the game. This intensive mission sets the scene for the rest of the game, specifically highlighting that *RDR2* players are in for a violent time.

The next mission provides more evidence for the "correct" application of violence and acts as a method of exposition for the player, further explaining why the gang is hanging out in the mountains, hiding from the law and tending to their wounds. Arthur was tasked to find John Marston, a gang member who has yet to return from a scouting trip. Now that the blizzard has cleared, the missing man can be tracked more easily. Arthur travels with Javier Escuella, another gang member, and the two track John higher into the mountains, far above the tree line.

While on their journey, Arthur asks Javier about the Blackwater boat job, the one that went so sideways it resulted in their gang hightailing it to the wilderness (i.e., the one mentioned

in the game's opening scene). Arthur was not present on the boat and asks Javier to clarify what happened. The information that Javier shares consists of details the player does not have, so the scene acts to deliver some needed exposition and context. Javier says Dutch killed a girl "in a bad way," but that it was a "bad situation", implying that Dutch would not normally commit such an act. Javier's comment reinforces the idea that there is a correct application of violence and that violence against women is wrong, but this correctness can be dictated by the context (it was a "bad" situation after all). This also lends credence to the belief that Arthur and other gang members share characteristics of being honorable people, if not good people. Arthur fully recognizes the illegality of many of the gang's activities, including his own, and admits he is a bad person, but often he means "bad" as in "criminal" and not "evil." Arthur does not see himself, or the rest of the gang (with the possible exception of Micah) as evil people. Instead, they are decent folk trying to survive, which sometimes means doing criminal things the larger society might deem "bad."

By this point, it should be apparent that Arthur is not a novice in the violent arts. Within the first hour of gameplay, the developers clearly establish Arthur as a man accomplished at violence; one who is skilled in its many varieties. After a mission in which Arthur goes hunting with Charles, a gang member, to provide meat for the gang, Arthur drops off a slain deer with Pearson, the quartermaster. Pearson asks Arthur for help dressing the deer and says that, after all, Arthur is "a butcher" of sorts, implying that Arthur's ability to kill is well-known among gang members.

This penchant for violence was one I chose to explore in *RDR2* only as needed. I did what I could to find non-violent paths to mission success, to even see if such paths were available, but as I discuss below in the section on "Agency," that was usually not possible, as the

game often places you in situations in which your only options are to fight or flee. In fact, there were many encounters, often scripted ones, in which fighting was the only option. As noted above in my early encounter in the barn with an O'Driscoll: my own options were to beat him or threaten him. Without enough violence in either regard, I was unable to advance the game, which further illustrates that engaging in violent acts is the only way to make progress throughout the game.

Realizing violence was often going to be the only resort, I initially tried to keep track of how many people I killed, but as that number approached several dozen within the first two hours, I quickly lost an accurate count. The most encountered enemies early in the game's story are members of the rival O'Driscoll gang, and within a couple hours of playing, I had slain at least 40 O'Driscolls.

Despite my efforts to play as a gentler Arthur, that was often not a choice provided to me; indeed, violence was the only option. For instance, before leaving the abandoned mountain town the gang was sheltering in, Dutch decides it is best to attack a nearby camp of O'Driscolls. The player is given no chance to dissuade Dutch or choose to not take part in the battle. Many of the men of Dutch's gang ride out to find the O'Driscoll camp in a nearby abandoned mining town. Dutch and company descend upon the town after seeing Colm O'Driscoll, the leader of the O'Driscolls, is present. To reiterate, at no point, is the player given the option to *not* participate in this conflict.

After a prolonged gang versus gang battle among the tottering and rotted buildings, dozens of O'Driscoll bodies lay strewn among the snow, many of them slain by my own hand. In fact, since there were no casualties among the attackers, who were outnumbered by the O'Driscolls, "massacre" might be a better descriptor of this mission than "battle." After

congratulating his men on their victory, Dutch leads the gang back to their hideout only to see an escaping man wearing O'Driscoll colors (green). Arthur rides down to the survivor and lassos him, ties him to Arthur's horse, and rides back to camp with the unfortunate soul slung over the back of the steed. On the way back, the man (i.e., the survivor) asks Arthur where he is being taken.

Arthur replies, "I'm taking you someplace you won't like… to do some*thing* you won't like. Better save your breath for screaming." There is no dialogue choice presented to players at this point; this is a programmed interaction and a chilling one at that. Arthur has to say this in the context of the game. Despite how a player might be role-playing Arthur, the vision of his character held by the game developers is that Arthur is a violent man, provided that violence is applied towards the benefit of the gang; in other words, that the violence is applied correctly or appropriately. Arthur expresses no qualms about the violent acts about to be done upon this prisoner. This violence is acceptable and warranted within the context of the game.

Earlier, while with Javier, Arthur seemed bewildered that Dutch would shoot an innocent woman saying, "That ain't like Dutch"; however, the next day Arthur has no misgivings about torturing a man who is merely associated with Arthur's enemies. There is no evidence the captured man participated in any actions against Dutch and company. This man is believed to be an enemy not because of his direct behavior, but through his association. Regardless, as long as the violence is applied in the "right" manner, to the benefit of the gang and its members, Arthur has no problems with it.

In another case, as Arthur and several of the camp women head into town (in the next chapter of the game, after they descend the mountain), they encounter a man whose horse has run off. Arthur stops the wagon he is driving and helps the stranger recover his horse. After helping

the man, Arthur tells his friends that he only aided the traveler to impress the women; otherwise

he would have "robbed the man." Arthur follows this "code" of violence, as well as when (not)

to enact it and these rules become clear to the player over the course of playing the game.

Even if the violence is not physical, Arthur's physicality lends credibility to the idea that

he can inflict grievous harm. During the second act of the game, the gang leaves the mountains

and sets up camp in the heartlands, an area of rolling plains and wildlife. A nearby town,

Valentine, offers the gang ample opportunity to earn/steal money, thus the player visits the town

several times.[19]

In one such visit, a man recognizes Arthur from Blackwater, where the gang are still very

much "wanted criminals." Arthur tells the man he is mistaken, that Arthur has not been to

Blackwater. After this conversation, Arthur moves to approach the man. The stranger flees and

after a short chase on horseback, the stranger falls of a cliff and is hanging above a ravine with

only Arthur to save him. The game provides the player a choice to push the man off the cliff or

to pull him up. I chose to pull him up, thinking that the less violent option. The man thanks

Arthur and introduces himself as Jimmy Brooks, to which Arthur threateningly replies "Jimmy

Brooks. I will remember that. I've got a good memory," clearly implying all sorts of dark

retribution should Brooks tell the law about who he has seen in the area. Clearly, Arthur is

accomplished at violence in all its forms, not just the physical aspects. And again, the player's

character has no choice but to commit a violent act. Should I have chosen to let the man perish,

Jimmy would have surely died. I was mistaken that pulling him off the cliff would not result in

violence, rather it resulted in a different sort of violence: threats as opposed to instant death.

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[19] For a list of major towns in *RDR2*, please see Appendix B.

Further, violence is acceptable not only in self-defense. As mentioned earlier, torture also has its place in the gang's chest of information gathering tools. Time and time again, Arthur or another member of the gang, threaten to torture someone in order to learn necessary information, which is needed to progress through the game. These scenes seem to operate under a sort of preemptive defense; the character performing the torture is doing so in order to better protect the gang from a future event. This is clearly seen in an interaction with Kiernan, the former O'Driscoll who Arthur roped in Act 1, and who, in Act 2, the gang keeps tied to a tree on the edge of camp.

Dutch, Arthur, and Bill pay Kiernan a visit, in which Dutch tells Bill to geld, or castrate, Kiernan in order to get Kiernan to talk. Bill obliges and gathers his gelding tools before Kiernan breaks and tells the men the information they seek, which leads to a mission called "Paying a Social Call." Again, despite no proof that Kiernan had ever taken action against gang, Dutch and his followers were ready to torture him as a means to gather information in order to "protect" the gang against the O'Driscolls. I use quotation marks here, because it is not clear if the O'Driscolls are really planning to attack Dutch's gang or if Dutch and company are really the aggressors. Regardless, the rationale behind the tortuous acts are that they are done in the gang's interests.

In the mission using Kiernan's information, Arthur and a few others raid an O'Driscoll camp. The group of gang members find the O'Driscolls at a remote cabin in a forest. The early part of the mission is envisioned to be an introduction to the game's stealth mechanics in that players are intended to silently approach the O'Driscoll guards and eliminate them using strangulation or knives, as gunshots would be loud and thus draw O'Driscoll reinforcements. During the assault, the player is given several options as to how to deal with various scouts and guards around the camp. For instance, players can choose to send Bill or John to eliminate the

guards or players can do it themselves. However, despite all of the choices provided, eventually the player and their allies are drawn into yet another gun battle, but the result is the same: a pile of dead O'Driscolls. As I will discuss in the "Agency" section below, violence and player agency are intertwined a great deal throughout the game, and this mission will be revisited in that discussion. The primary interaction of agency and violence, though, is that in many cases the game forces the player to enact violence, often a great deal of violence, in order to progress forward in the game, as it was in the Adlers' barn and as it was at this cabin with the O'Driscolls.

In several other instances, I encountered significant battles in which violence was the only option. In these cases, the player is thrust into a situation wherein he must fire upon dozens of enemies who are trying to kill the player character and his allies. Sometimes the attackers are law enforcement and sometimes they are members of a private security force; but in both instances, Dutch's Gang leaves dozens of bodies in their wake. In fact, in two missions with Micah alone, I was responsible for approximately 50 deaths.

A final example of both the "code of violence," and violence being the only option, is during a mission with Micah. Micah convinces Arthur to help him rob a stagecoach containing the payroll to a local company. During the robbery, Arthur and Micah fend off (i.e., kill) several stagecoach riflemen and outriders before the wagon crashes into a river. While recovering the loot from the river, Micah and Arthur are set upon by O'Driscolls. After scaring off the rival gang, Arthur and Micah survive, having slain another score of enemies, and Arthur laments the fact that each job he does with Micah ends with a pile of bodies, seemingly showing a sense of remorse for foes felled by his firearm. However, Micah points out that they were "only O'Driscolls," a point Arthur concedes with a chuckle. Violence is perfectly acceptable when

used against those who might threaten Dutch's gang, especially those that "ain't even human" such as the O'Driscolls.

The "code of violence" in *RDR2* consists of several principles for behavior. Through Arthur's eyes, the player discovers the following principles: (a) violence is acceptable in self-defense (e.g., Arthur beats a man who attacks him in a bar in Valentine); (b) violence is acceptable in defense of the gang, wherein "defense" is defined as, but not limited to, protecting the gang, its interests, and its potential income gains (e.g., Arthur tortures Kiernan to pre-emptively protect the gang or Arthur kills stagecoach employees standing between him and the money the coach is transporting); (c) violence against unarmed men, women, and children is not acceptable, unless they violate rules a or b (e.g., Arthur is shocked that Dutch shot a woman during the Blackwater job); and (d) "violence" here is defined as, but not limited to, threatening, shooting, hitting, stabbing, killing, torturing, or otherwise inflicting harm upon another person or their psyche.

It was also clear to me through examining the data on violence, that this violence was intersectional in nature. Violence is never present on its own; other aspects always accompanied it. For instance, the protective and defensive violence Arthur often employed is very paternalistic and masculine in nature. He is, at times, literally placing himself between his community and existing threats. As a result, I began to see this violence as a positive. Here I was, as Arthur, protecting my found family from danger. Why would I not begin to see this violence as an acceptable option in other situations in the game? Another interesting note about the intersectionality of violence is that it was, to my recollection, almost always performed by masculine people, usually men. Women did not have access to violence, or to the power using

violence typically grants. Essentially, this game shows violence as a tool of masculinity, the two concepts are paired so frequently, an uncritical player may see them as the same thing.

In short, violence is in large supply during the story missions and often the player is left with no choice but to enact violence upon dozens of nameless enemies. Technically, I did have a choice to *not* commit these violent acts, but to do so would result in a mission failure. So, the choice was ultimately either kill dozens of others to progress the story, or not kill anyone and remain stuck at that point in the game. Now, the argument could be made that, in a game such as *RDR2*, the story might not be the focus for all players as the game is part of the open-world genre (discussed earlier in Chapter 2) and thus these players may not make the same choices I did. However, as Rockstar is known for its grand stories, particularly in the *Red Dead* series (Favis, 2018), these players are likely the minority. Most players would likely face the same binary I did: (a) shoot everyone and progress or (b) remain peaceful and stagnate.

Within *RDR2*, in addition to violence and the rules accompanying its application, I also found quite a bit of evidence supporting the notion that hegemonic masculinity features a component of strength, both physical and mental. The next section elaborates this finding.

Strength. The next component within the overall theme of masculinity in *RDR2* is strength. For this theme, I coded instances in which characters used their power to influence each other and/or show resilience. In terms of influence, this could be physical manipulation of another character's body or influence through giving orders. Physical feats like lifting things or overpowering others would be strength, as well as traits like toughness or grit. Essentially, strength was an important characteristic in the creation of the game's masculinity, as it is for hegemonic masculinity (Kluch, 2015), but it was secondary to the adherence to the "code of violence," discussed in the previous section.

One of the first and most impressive displays of strength is during the second act of the game, after the gang has spent time in Colter[20] healing. The gang has recently arrived from their mountain shelter to the heartlands and have set up camp at Horseshoe Overlook, near the town of Valentine. After a brief rest, Arthur journeys to Valentine during a mission called "Americans at Rest." As part of the mission, Arthur visits a local bar where he quickly enters into a fight. While most of the fight would have fallen under the purview of violence, two interesting points stood out to me and thus suggested that this particular fight fit better with the theme of strength instead. First, Arthur's role in the fight and his comeback victory. The fight begins after some local town members hurl slurs at fellow gang member, Javier. Arthur and Javier begin fighting the townsfolk, with Arthur single-handedly knocking out most of the combatants. At the beginning of the fight, there are around a dozen opponents and, one by one, Arthur punches them into submission. Yes, this is a very violent act but, in my view, it more so demonstrates Arthur's incredible strength. Not only does he have the physical strength to knock someone into unconsciousness, he also has the resilience involved to do this for several minutes on end, a feat of endurance, as well as power.

The second instance of strength in this scene is when the "boss" of "Americans at Rest" comes to fight. Arthur, as described earlier, is a tall, large man. But at the end of the bar fight he is attacked by an even larger man, Tommy. Tommy throws Arthur threw a window and then beats him into the mud, but Arthur perseveres and returns to the fight, time and time again. Finally, after it seems Tommy will be victorious, Arthur (the player) is able to force Tommy into the mud and beat him senseless. Again, this scene shows Arthur's physical strength and his

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[20] See Appendix B for a list of towns and settlements in *RDR2*.

resilience quite clearly as he is able to continue this fist fight for some time and enact a come-from-behind victory over what seems to be a stronger opponent.

Another example of Arthur's strength is his ability to carry great loads over long distances. For example, early in the game while at a town, Colter, Arthur goes on a mission with Charles,[21] another gang member, to find some meat for the gang while they hide in the mountains. While out, the two track and kill a large deer. Arthur single-handedly places the buck over his shoulder and walks through knee-deep snow for over 200 yards to his horse, before placing the carcass on the steed. As the average white-tail male deer weighs nearly 200 pounds (Barber, 2017), this trek requires great strength on Arthur's part. Other characters remark on Arthur's strength as well. During one interaction with Sadie, she comments that while she is a woman, she can contribute to the gang just as well as a "big, strong man can."

Dutch also speaks of strength, though his comments are more about the strength of personal character and community. For instance, while in the mountains licking their wounds, Dutch gives a brief eulogy for Davey, who succumbed to his injuries. Dutch addresses the gang and acknowledges the significant setback they have encountered. Some gang members are still missing, presumed dead. They are low on supplies and money. They have run to a remote location and are barely getting by. But Dutch tells his community that they will "always get back up and fight" and encourages them to tap into whatever resilience they have within themselves to help the community "persevere" through these trying times. In this instance, Dutch is using his powerful orator skills, bordering on demagoguery, wherein he ultimately convinces the gang of their own endurance and strength.

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[21] Again, refer to Appendix B for a list of characters.

Later in the game, the gang is forced to move from Valentine to a camp in the swamp, Clemen's Point, near the town of Rhodes in the state of Lemoyne. After they set up camp, the second significant move in a short time, Dutch again addresses the gang, sensing their morale is low after fleeing yet again. This time, Dutch talks of all the hurdles they have overcome together. Dutch says, "We have survived the mountains, we can survive the Pinkertons," pointing to past triumphs as evidence of future success. At this point, Dutch is relying on his community's continued support, as well as their strength and resilience.

***Definition by contrast*.** The final way in which *RDR2* creates masculinity is by contrasting it to what it *is not*. Rather than have a character say "men do this"; instead, the game often contrasts masculinity with things it is not, in order to showcase what it is. This was perhaps the most difficult theme to code, as it mostly consisted of veiled references and subtle implications between characters.

For instance, one of the early missions involves Arthur and Javier searching the mountains for John. They find John on a narrow ledge bleeding from several open wounds, his horse having been killed further down the mountain. John had been attacked by wolves and fended them off but told Arthur and Javier he could not fight the animals off again should they return. Rather than praising John's strength at being able to fight off a wolf pack, Arthur chastises John for needing rescuing like "some lost maiden or damsel in distress." Instead of saying John is a man for certain reasons, Arthur defines John's masculinity by what it is not (i.e., "some lost maiden or damsel in distress"). John is less of a man because he needed rescuing, and thus, he was not self-sufficient.

A second and recurring example of this contrast is shown in the character of Pearson, the camp's cook and quartermaster. Pearson was in the Navy before he joined the gang and often

references his experiences in the organization. Arthur also comments on Pearson's experience in the Navy, saying he "did not want to know what Pearson got up to in the Navy" without any women around, clearly implying homosexual acts. In another instance, an emergency requires the gang to return to camp and Pearson laments the fact that he did not get all the supplies he needed. Arthur chastises him saying, "Sorry your shopping trip got cut short." In both cases, Arthur implies that Pearson is less of a man than he. Despite the fact that Pearson provides an important service to the gang, he is looked down upon by Arthur for being less masculine because Pearson does not go "robbin'" with the rest of the gang.

An interesting example of *RDR2* defining hegemonic masculinity by contrast is the case of Sadie Adler, the woman who Dutch and Arthur rescued in the early moments of the game and whom Micah assaulted. During the third act of the story, Sadie Adler expresses to Arthur that she would like to contribute to the gang in a more meaningful way than by working as a kitchen aide to Pearson after Arthur comes across Sadie working with the quartermaster, Pearson, and telling Pearson that if she "doesn't get out of her soon" she's "gonna kill somebody." After the confrontation nearly escalates into a knife fight, Arthur asks "What is wrong with you two?"

Sadie replies "I ain't chopping vegetables for a living" before explaining that while she and her late husband were on their farm, they split all the work equally and she expresses her sincere desire to "go robbin'" with the men of the gang. By the end of the mission, Sadie has helped Arthur slay nearly a dozen enemy gang members. This shows very clearly that Sadie is *not* like the other camp women. She is violent, coarse, and loud, like her male counterparts. Hegemonic masculinity places her in an interesting position in that it elevates her above the other camp women, but still places her on a hierarchal rung below that of the men of the gang. She may act like a man, but she is not one; not really. Sadie's experience and characterization shows

a stark difference between her and the rest of the camp women. In fact, she is the only one that really makes it to the upper tier of the gang's hierarchy in that she goes on missions with the men from time to time, she is not simply a honeypot like the other women, she is a provider. Though she took on these masculine characteristics, she still represents the feminine; specifically, what the feminine can achieve by acting more masculine.

The final instance of contrast I want to discuss is Arthur's disdain for civilization and "softness," as he refers to it. Arthur sees himself as a true man, one who fulfills all the ideas of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., power, strength, heterosexuality, etc.). But, as Arthur argues, this is due to his freedom and outlaw role. At one point, Arthur discusses his notion that a "gentleman" is not a real man. A gentleman is a civilized man, but one who has lost his edge, his hardness, and has become soft. The clear implication is that men, true men, should not be soft, but rather hard and tough.

While there were not a large number of instances in which this theme (i.e., definition by contrast) was present, it was significant enough that I felt it warranted discussion. Using these three themes (i.e., a code of violence, strength, and definition by contrast), *RDR2* clearly reifies existing concepts of hegemonic masculinity, something I discuss further in the subsequent chapter (i.e., Chapter 5). However, the next section examines the results of the second part of the first research question, shifting the focusing from hegemonic masculinity to whiteness.

Whiteness. For the second part of the first research question, I looked for and coded examples within *RDR2* of challenging or upholding the concept of whiteness. Essentially, in this game, as within the concept of whiteness, whiteness is seen as the norm. Most of the characters in *RDR2* are White, as are all the playable characters; thus whiteness is the default. As such, there were far fewer examples of whiteness found in the game than there were examples of

hegemonic masculinity, but the reason for this is clear, as *RDR2* firmly upholds the concept of whiteness. So, of course, it makes sense that this would be less prevalent than other themes as it is the default, essentially the entire game could be coded as White.

In fact, the only times race is explicitly remarked upon by the characters is when a character of a non-White race is present in the scene. For instance, in a discussion with Arthur, Charles says that his mother is Native American, and his father was a freed slave. His mother was captured by United States soldiers and never seen again. This caused Charles' father to fall into the drink and lose himself to alcohol. Charles is seen as the best hunter of the gang which, combined with his parents' fate, received some criticism due to its stereotypical character portrayal and the fact that the character is voiced by an actor who is neither Black nor Native American (Lacina, 2018). The fact that Charles explicitly states the gang (of mostly White people) has been mostly "fair" to him reinforces the notion that whiteness is benevolent.

Another example of whiteness being the default comes when the gang moves to a swampy region, reminiscent of the southeastern part of the United States. On a mission with Lenny, a Black man, Arthur asks if it was "really all that different in this state" compared to the northern regions that he comes from. Arthur says he really has not noticed a difference. Lenny replies, "All respect, Mr. Morgan, you wouldn't notice…Most of it is a glance or a word. And after that? A visit in the night." Lenny is arguing the fact that Arthur's whiteness shields him from the behaviors and experiences Lenny witnesses. Interestingly, while in this region, if the player goes exploring at night, they may come across members of the KKK in all their regalia initiating new members or beginning to burn a cross. Should the player choose, they may attack and kill all the KKK members present with no consequences. In fact, during one such occurrence, Arthur begins shouting about the "goddamn hooded bastards."

This connection to the KKK alludes to another aspect of whiteness in *RDR2*; racism should *not* be overt. Under the auspices of whiteness, overt racism is detestable and unacceptable. This is never explicitly stated, but rather implied through character dialogue, such as Arthur's outrage at the KKK members or through the reactions to Micah's several racist outbursts. For example, in one instance, Micah is talking to a group of the gang's men about their cowardice in his eyes saying, "You're all yella, except you of course." This last part he directed towards Lenny, the only person of color present. This clearly racist comment is not remarked upon by any in the gang, but earlier, when Micah was upset at having to sleep in the same bunk room as Lenny and Charles, the only two Black men in the gang, Micah's utterance of a racial slur was met with an admonishment by Hosea, one of the gang's lieutenants and thus higher in the gang's structure than Micah.

Other instances of Whiteness throughout the game include Dutch's paternalism towards members of the gang. I confront this before I even began playing the game, as the beginning cut scene in which Dutch doles out orders to the gang members, before begging them to "Stay with me. We will get through this together." Dutch is doing his best to remain in charge, while also bolstering the gang's morale. Dutch also asks repeatedly for others to trust him, without ever actually providing any reciprocation. Dutch hoards his power and keeps important information to himself in order to maintain his position atop the gang's hierarchy. In fact, one of the major subplots of the story is how Arthur's trust in Dutch begins to erode.

The examples above again reveal how the game supports the current system of whiteness in that overt racism, like the KKK's practices or Micah's use of a slur, is unacceptable. But subtler, yet still racist behavior, like Micah's "yella" comment, is supported by the game, as seen

through the lack of consequences for this type of racism. Again, this concept is examined further in the next chapter.

Summary of research question 1. In short, when exploring the first research question (i.e., how are masculinity and whiteness discursively constructed through the programmed interactions of the characters in *RDR2*?), I found that *RDR2* does not challenge existing notions of hegemonic masculinity or whiteness in any significant way. In fact, the game reifies many of the existing characteristics of these concepts. First, violence is an important part of the game and, indeed, the player is often required to participate in violence, and, at times, the player is rewarded for their participation. Strength is another important component of this type of masculinity as the main character, Arthur, is shown as being incredibly strong and resilient. In fact, the entire gang is shown to be resilient through the trials they have overcome as a community. Finally, the game overtly contrasts Arthur and masculinity with several other examples of the "not masculine," in order to further establish Arthur's position as a manly man. Overall, the game does not really attempt to ever challenge notions of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, the game asks players to fully embrace these ideas of violence and strength in order to succeed.

The same can be said for the game's depiction of whiteness. *RDR2* presents whiteness as the default, the norm. The only playable characters are White. All the characters with significant power are White. Persons of color are all relegated to supporting roles, several of whom employ stereotypical tropes concerning race such as Charles' heritage. Overall, the game does no significant work to challenge existing ideas of whiteness.

While an argument may exist that the game only asks players to engage in these behaviors while acting as a character within the game, I remind readers to return to Chapter 2

and my discussion of the effects of video games. The attitudes of a game like *RDR2*, concerning concepts such as hegemonic masculinity and whiteness, are exactly the types of concepts in which games *do* have influence over the attitudes of players. Indeed, the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity in *RDR2* could easily be seen by players as acceptable social behavior as could the notion that whiteness is the neutral, and racism is acceptable as long as it is not overt. Now that I have examined the results to the first research question, I move to the second research question concerning player agency.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked, how is the player given (or denied) in-game agency in *RDR2*? This question comes as a result of the open-world nature of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. As a reminder for readers, open-world games are those that are built on the premise that players can explore, travel, and do whatever they like within the game; the world is open for the player. These games are built with a large in-game, world full of activities for the player to complete, or not complete, at the player's discretion. The idea is that players want the freedom to do what they want, and the game definitely provides that freedom to the player. Thus, for this project I thought it important to examine how much agency a player truly has while playing *RDR2*.

While trying to answer this question, I found two overarching themes: (a) direction and (b) freedom. This is unsurprising considering Nevarro-Remesal's (2018) concept of "directed freedom," which was discussed in Chapter 2 and, after highlighting the results of the second research question, I return to this concept in the final chapter. The core concept of an open-world game is that it is not truly "open," in that players cannot do *anything* they like. Instead, they have "directed freedom," or freedom within a certain set of boundaries or parameters (Nevarro-

Remesal, 2018). This is in line with what I found: players of *RDR2* have a lot of freedom of behavior, but only within the limits or parameters set by the game.

In terms of direction, this code included instances in which the game tried to direct the player towards certain behaviors or actions. For instance, if a player enacted a certain behavior and failed a mission or was rewarded, this would be the game directing the player. Essentially, by failing the mission, the game tells the player, "do not do that." By succeeding a mission or providing a reward such a new piece of equipment, the game tells the player, "yes, like that." These messages are not explicit through in-game text or any other means, but rather implied. The fact that I was allowed to continue the narrative acted as the game's tacit support of my actions. If I were to encounter a mission failure or the message, "game over," the game was implying I had behaved inappropriately and thus must try again. The other theme, freedom, includes instances in which there was a large element of choice for the player, without consequence or reward. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there was a large intersection between the data from the first two research questions.

Direction. Direction is the theme that had the most overlap with data from the first research question, specifically with regard to violence. Violence and direction were constantly seen in conjunction with one another, as much of the game directed the player to engage in violent behaviors and punished or rewarded the player for such behavior. Codes for this theme included instances in which players were directed or urged towards specific behaviors using in-game punishments or incentives. Punishments could include instances of mission failure (essentially a game over) or being chastised or attacked by allies. Incentives could be things like unlocking new game items (e.g., holster, horse, weapons, etc.) or being praised by allies. In

either case, these punishments or rewards are the game's way of telling the player that a

particular behavior (or set of behaviors) was either acceptable or not.

Before getting too far into the examination of the data for the second research question, I

would like to describe the manner in which I approached Arthur's character and behavior in my

playthrough, as relevant to this dissertation project. Given that *RDR2* is an open-world game in

which players experience a great degree of freedom, I chose to play Arthur as an honorable, non-

violent person. As I described above, in the analysis of my first research question, I did my best

to avoid killing other characters and tried to find non-violent resolutions to obstacles. Though

Arthur is an outlaw and a prominent member of a gang of thieves, I saw no reason to commit

acts of violence or robbery unless the game forced me to do so. However, attempting to adhere to

this decision proved difficult.

RDR2 uses many of the early missions to show the player the game mechanics, such as

riding a horse, shooting a gun, or robbing stages. In particular, the early mission in which Arthur,

Dutch, and Micah assault the O'Driscolls at the Adlers' cabin introduces the player to the

concept of conducting an interrogation. As discussed in the analysis section of the first research

question, this mission featured Arthur grappling with an enemy and asking where the man's

allies were. Arthur was given the option to either beat the man or question the man; each of these

were tied to a specific input from the player's game controller. At first, this may seem like the

player was given the freedom to choose between the two options, but that choice was, in fact, an

illusion. Regardless of what I chose in this instance, in order to continue the game (i.e., continue

the mission), I needed to commit violence against the man. Thus, my choice was not really a

choice. As I said above, I wanted to only question the man, without further harming him, but the

game *directed me* to do otherwise. Unless I engaged in violence against this man in the dim barn,

I would be unable to progress in the game. In essence, the game rewarded me for committing violence by allowing me to continue the narrative (i.e., the game). Had I opted to not be violent, my game would have ended at approximately 20 minutes. This scene was clearly an instance of direction, for regardless of what sort of character I was trying to play Arthur as, I had to engage in a violent act to continue playing the game.

The theme of direction continued throughout much of the game; that is, the game would force me into violent situations, then reward me for successfully committing certain acts of violence (by allowing the game to continue). This was quite frustrating for me as a player, as it took away much of my agency and nullified many of the choices I had made for my character. But as a researcher and scholar, these instances served as important data points. I would argue that the single most salient point of data for this theme of direction came from a story mission entitled "Blessed are the Meek?," which I describe below.

As I detailed in Chapter 2 open-world games such as *RDR2* often include a main narrative for the players. It is useful to think of this "main narrative" as a television series. The main narrative is the story told by the entire show, start to finish. Each "act" within *RDR2* could be argued to function as a *season* of the show, and each story mission within that act, is an *episode* of the show. Thus, several story missions combine to make an act which, in turn, combine to make a story. In *RDR2* players may have several different story missions available to them at any given time, but completion of certain story missions may be required before other story missions become available. Completing these missions, and thus the overall story, is often the one of the primary goals in open-world games; but, ironically, I argue that this is where the open-world concept falls the shortest.

"Blessed are the Meek?" is a story mission that takes place in the second act. Dutch's gang has survived the mountains and set up camp on the plains near Valentine. The gang members disperse to earn income for the gang in whatever manner they can. During this mission, Arthur goes to rescue Micah, who has been imprisoned in the small nearby mountain town of Strawberry.[22] Arthur arrives at the jail pretending to be a bounty hunter. He asks to see the prisoners, but the lawmen deny him access to the jail. The player has no input in this scene; instead it is a scripted interaction between Arthur and the jailers. Afterwards, the game directs the player to move Arthur to the side of the building and to talk to Micah through the cell's window. Micah pleads with Arthur to get him out of the cell and Arthur jokes that he might just leave Micah in there to rot. This dialogue is all scripted and the only input from the player, Arthur, at this point is whether to: (a) greet Micah or (b) antagonize him. Regardless of what the player chooses, Micah responds the same; again, the illusion of choice. From there, the interaction is scripted and, again, the player has no input. Many story missions feature such scripted scenes in which the player loses control of Arthur and must watch a scene play out using the character they have spent so much time with.

Arthur must open the cell in order to continue the mission, rather than leave Micah to his fate, so he uses a nearby steam engine and an available hook to pull the window out of the jail wall. Micah rejoices as he is freed and grabs a gun from Arthur before turning around and shooting the other prisoner in the face. Shocked by this sudden and immediate violence, Arthur begins to berate Micah, only to find the pair of them set upon by the local lawmen. At this point, the player gains control of Arthur again, but does not gain full agency. As a reminder, I

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[22] Ironically, several town names in *RDR2* bely the regularly occurring violence within the community. Strawberry and Valentine specifically seem idyllic, but both feature a shootout so widespread it is essentially a small battle.

endeavored to play Arthur as a pacifist of sorts, only engaging in violence when the game forced my hand and, during this particular Micah mission, *RDR2* forced me into, essentially, committing another massacre. Instead of enemy O'Driscolls; however, this one featured the wanton slaughter of peace officers and various townsfolk.

From Micah's exit from the jail cell onward, Arthur is tasked with protecting Micah and ensuring his survival. I believe the specific task the game conveys to players is "escape town," but I quickly discovered that if I abandoned Micah to his own devices in order to escape on my own, Micah would die. If that happened, I would fail the mission, and I would have to start the game over at the point where Micah escapes the jail. If I simply hid near Micah and did not shoot at the enemy officers and townspeople, eventually Micah would die, I would fail the mission, and I would have to start the mission over. After several different approaches, I found the *only* way for me to progress through this mission was to battle dozens of people and slay them all. I was implicitly and explicitly directed to do this by the game or else I would be unable to progress or move forward. In accepting this mission, I lost any and all player agency and my character choices about what type of person Arthur was were rendered moot, as I was forced to kill dozens of men in order to protect a man who, at this point I am feeling is a piece of human garbage, but one who is providing me with rich data.

After battling through about 15 officers, Micah leads Arthur, and thus the player, to the house of a local man who he calls "Skinny" and kicks in the door while Arthur waits outside. Within a few seconds, Arthur hears shouts and a few gunshots before Micah emerges, now with two pistols. Micah tells Arthur that he needed to reclaim his property and is now, finally, ready to leave town. At this point Micah yells, "I showed him and now I'll show the rest of this town."

Hellbent on inflicting as much harm as he can, Micah sprints back to the main part of town and the battle with lawmen begins anew.

Eventually, Arthur and Micah battle their way to their horses and ride away from town, while shooting at the few lawmen on horseback. After killing or outrunning these final pursuers, Arthur and Micah come to a stop and Arthur yells at Micah for killing a whole town. Indeed, by this point, there were easily 30 slain lawmen in the town. In fact, they might not have been lawmen, the enemies might have been regular townsfolk, as the game did not specify. However, the result was the same; at least 30 people lay dead, many of them at the hands of Arthur, and there was nothing the player could have done to stop the slaughter. As I said, each non-violent method I tried in my playthrough of the game resulted in a mission failure. Only by engaging in the killing was I able to advance the game. I suppose it was all worth it (sarcasm) as Micah rewards Arthur with a holster for a second sidearm, now allowing the player to equip two sidearm weapons.

The downside, however, is that the player's actions, forced though they may have been, have resulted in a bounty of $300 being placed on Arthur's head; a very significant sum of money in this game.[23] In addition, the town of Strawberry was placed on lockdown, a game mechanic in which the townsfolk and lawmen in the area are hypervigilant and would fire upon Arthur without warning, essentially locking Arthur out of the area until the cordon is lifted. In total, by the end of the mission, I have killed approximately 30 people, have a bounty of $300 on my head, and am locked out of a significant area of the game's world. Further, as I played through the game, I had no agency in any of my decisions; the game directed me towards these

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[23] For comparison, killing a person will only result in a bounty of around $40.

actions. Presumably, the game directed me to do so in order to accomplish two things, which are described below.

First, within this mission, it was further established that Micah's character is someone who is needlessly violent and reckless. This stands in contrast to the tactically violent and more contemplative nature of Arthur. I make both of these statements based on the scripted interactions between Arthur and Micah. For instance, after they escape Strawberry, Arthur says "Let me thank you. There I was having a dull day only for you to liven it up by letting me help you shoot up half a town." Based on Arthur's tone and the aggressive posturing of his body, he does not appreciate Micah's behavior. Second, this mission introduced players to the lockdown component of the game, wherein the player is denied entry to certain parts of the game world. Regardless, the player had no agency concerning this mission and its outcome. Either you, the player, kill nearly three-dozen people, or you fail the mission and cannot proceed in the story.

This directed violence was the recurring theme within the game. What I quickly discovered is that the open-world nature of the game really only applied to the instances *outside* of the story missions (e.g., in deciding what clothes Arthur wears and/or how much he eats or where he rides his horse). Once a player begins a story mission, their choices are very limited, if they are present at all. Most of the character choices afforded to a player during a mission were of a binary fashion. For instance, one of the missions discussed in the section above regarding the first research question is entitled, "Paying a Social Call," in which Arthur and some allies assault an O'Driscoll cabin based on intelligence provided by Kiernan, the former O'Driscoll Arthur captured early in the game, under threat of torture. During the mission, the game endeavors to teach the player about stealth mechanics, or how to dispatch an enemy without raising an alarm. During the mission, the gang finds the O'Driscoll cabin and as they begin the

assault, Arthur takes the lead and is presented with a series of *choices* when the group comes upon a sentry. Arthur can either remove the sentry himself or send an ally to do it. Thus, the extent of the player "agency" in the mission became either kill the enemy myself or use an ally to do the killing. If I chose to remove the sentry myself, I could choose which weapon to use (ironically, the game did not restrict that), but the more important point is I *had* to eliminate the sentry. There was no component of negotiation or distraction involved, these sentries would die. Indeed, my player agency was quite limited.

Thus, each story mission almost plays out very nearly like a television episode. Though the player may be able to control the character and thus participate in the episode, they are not able to make their own choices; instead they only control the character, so far as the player follows the mission's script. Otherwise, as mentioned above, they must start the mission over.

In another story mission, Arthur is asked to find Reverend Swanson, a gang member who does not seem to serve much purpose, other than to trouble the others with his drinking. Regardless, Swanson is found in a highly-inebriated state playing cards with some locals at a train station not far from the gang's camp. Arthur offers to take the Reverend home, but Swanson runs away into the surrounding countryside. After chasing the Reverend down, Arthur finds Swanson being attacked by another man. At this point, the player *must* assault this complete stranger, in order to protect Swanson; much like how the player must kill the people in the town of Strawberry to protect Micah. During my fight with the man assaulting Swanson, another man witnesses the altercation and runs to inform law enforcement of my misdeeds. At this point, I, as the player, again am *directed by the game* to chase down this witness and to intimidate him into silence. This is another instance of the game teaching the player about important game mechanics; this time, about witnesses to your crimes and how to handle those situations, but the

point remains that I had *no choice* or agency in this matter. In order to continue playing the game, I was, in a way, forced to assault these two men in order to complete the mission. Thus, overall, it is clear that, as the player, I am given very little and limited choice in these missions. For example, after I defeat the man assaulting Swanson and chase down the witness, I am given the choice to verbally threaten the man or, as the game suggests, draw my sidearm and fire it into the air. While I am given a choice, it is binary in nature; option A or B, but ultimately the result is the same in that I commit more violence.

Other than story missions, there are two other significant and recurring instances in which players lost most of their agency: ambushes and bounty hunters. An ambush is a random event in which members of a rival gang[24] attack Arthur. To my knowledge, these do not happen while the player is taking part in a story mission, rather these are events that take place as part of the open-world experience, as Arthur is traveling from activity to activity, or just wandering the world. Each gang has several scripted ambushes from simply rushing up on horseback from behind a hill or using a disabled stagecoach to lay and wait for Arthur. In any case, there are only two options when a player is ambushed: fight or flee. There is no option to negotiate with the attackers or pay them off. Arthur must either flee the scene or fight them off; otherwise the ambushers will kill Arthur. Importantly, I should note, these encounters are usually very brief.

Similarly, much of the player's agency is removed when they encounter bounty hunters. As I mentioned earlier, by committing illegal acts in view of a witness, the player may earn themselves a bounty, such as the bounty placed upon me after the massacre at Strawberry. These bounties vary in amount based upon the severity of the offense, but once the bounty becomes large enough, computer-controlled bounty hunters may come after Arthur. From my experience,

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[24] There are a number of rival gangs throughout *RDR2*. The O'Driscolls are the most common, but most regions of the game's world have a powerful gang in residence.

this does not occur as soon as the bounty threshold is reached, it may happen a few hours or days (in terms of in-game time) after the crimes were committed and the bounty has been established. At some point, though, while out in the world, Arthur will be attacked by bounty hunters. In this case, it is very similar to the ambush scenario, in that Arthur must either kill the bounty hunters or run from them. However, in addition to this, while bounty hunters are chasing Arthur, the player is unable to complete or start other missions. Essentially, if bounty hunters are after you, they must be dealt with in order to progress through the game; yet another instance wherein there is complete removal of player agency.

This all created an interesting scenario during my playing time. Again, I tried to play Arthur as peacefully and lawfully as possible. By my estimation, all the illegal and violent acts I participated in were part of a story mission (i.e., I was required to do it by the game in order to progress the narrative). At the point I had completed data collection from the game playthrough, none of the bounties I had earned were through actions I had any choice in as the player. Several hours into playing, I had a rather sizeable bounty on my head, though the bounty was the result of actions I had taken while on a story mission and thus, not by choice. As I was trying to start another story mission, I soon discovered I was unable to do so, as a group of bounty hunters had appeared and were riding to attack me. So, by taking part in a story mission in which I was forced to commit several violent and murderous acts, I earned a bounty. Then, the bounty was high enough that bounty hunters were spawned by the game in order to attack me. Then, because the bounty hunters were present, I was unable to start a new story mission. It was a conflux of several different events all combining to remove almost all of my agency as a player and, instead force me into, yet another, violent confrontation. In fact, much of the game seemed to follow a

pattern of: "You must kill these people so you can participate in a mission to go kill these other people."

Perhaps the broadest example of "directed freedom" came about as a result of how Arthur's appearance was customized. Indeed, Arthur's weight, hair, and clothing can all be customized by the player. For example, a player can choose to let Arthur's hair and beard grow, a player can choose to cut and style his hair, or shave Arthur's facial hair into a variety of styles. For instance, I often chose to shave Arthur's head while leaving his beard untamed (yes, weird and ironic, I know). I could also purchase hair products to style his hair further or to make it grow faster.

In addition, Arthur's diet affected his weight. *Red Dead Redemption 2* features a variety of edible items, each corresponding to an in-game effect. For instance, chocolate might restore Arthur's health, while a cigarette might help Arthur slow time slightly to place his shots more accurately. However, depending on what Arthur ate and how often, his weight would fluctuate. At the beginning of the game, Arthur's weight was "average."[25] If Arthur eats mostly chocolate and cooked meat, and eats these things often, he will become "overweight." Should the player choose not to feed Arthur very often, he will become "underweight." Each of these classifications comes with certain in-game effects as well. For instance, being overweight increases Arthur's resistance to damage, meaning bullets and animal attacks do not negatively affect his health as much as one might imagine. However, when Arthur is overweight, he has less stamina and cannot sprint as long as his underweight self. In contrast, being underweight affords Arthur more stamina, and thus longer sprinting ability, but attacks do more damage to his overall health. Players may choose to have Arthur eat as much, or as little, as they prefer. I did not

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[25] There is an in-game menu in which many of the characteristics of Arthur can be seen, including his weight. The three tiers of weight are Underweight, Average, and Overweight.

encounter an instance in which I was forced to put on weight or to lose weight, that was entirely within my choice.

If a player chooses, they can go to a general store in order to buy items such as coffee, tobacco, beans, ammunition, or even clothing, to name a few things. When looking through the clothing options, the player may choose to utilize the dressing room which shows what Arthur would look like with the current piece of clothing on. Depending on the store's stock, the player can buy many different items for Arthur to wear, including hats, vests, shirts, coats, boots, and pants. The player can choose to purchase these items individually or even as part of a complete outfit. However, the clothing options are not unlimited, nor are they particularly unique. While they may differ in terms of style or color, they are all stereotypically masculine clothes in that the player is not given the option to purchase dresses or skirts for Arthur, let alone a nice parasol, despite the fact that these items exist in the game's world and are regularly seen in use by NPCs.[26] The player is restricted to only purchasing masculine clothing for Arthur. So, while it is true that the player may choose to customize Arthur in a variety of ways, the choices are still limited. Thus, the player's freedom is limited or directed, as Nevarro-Remesal (2018) describes. The freedom a player experiences in this open world is very much directed within designated and pre-determined limits. Now that I have detailed the most salient ways in which *RDR2* denies a player agency, the next section will discuss the myriad ways in which the game does afford the player agency.

Freedom. Should I desire structured gameplay goals outside the narrative missions, I had quite a few choices. There are side missions (i.e., short, self-contained stories not required for overall narrative progress), exploration, gambling, robbery, treasure hunts, and collectibles such

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[26] NPCs again are non-player characters.

as cigarette cards. These are all examples of the myriad ways in which a player of *RDR2* can interact with the world. As I wrote in the previous section, the game affords players very little agency while they are on a story mission. However, while outside a story mission, players have quite a bit of player agency when it comes to how they would like to spend their time. When examining the data concerning the second research question, it was quickly apparent that the game affords players agency in an almost binary manner. Story missions deny most forms of agency; while outside story missions, the player is provided with a large amount of agency (all within the same game).

If a player does not want to progress *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s narrative, they have a myriad of options about how to spend their time. The game world itself is massive. Some estimates put the game's size at about 29 square miles (Fish, 2019) or a few square miles larger than Salina, Kansas, a town of approximately 45,000 people (QuickFacts, n.d.). Simply wandering the waterways, plains, forests, and islands of the game's world is enough to occupy a player for quite some time. If, though, a player would like more direction to accompany their wanderings, they could engage in a lengthy search for treasure. The game also features several inns and restaurants, in which the player could sit at a poker table and play a few hands. Additionally, the player could wander the countryside and rob other characters going about their lives. The player could choose to roam the game's world in search of animals to hunt, skin, and craft into a variety of garments, holsters, or pouches. Until the player chooses to begin a story mission, they have immense freedom to explore the world and engage with other characters, which stands in stark contrast to how the player is directed while on story missions.

Summary of research question 2. The second research question asked how *RDR2* afforded or denied agency to a player. As discovered, the answer is very binary; either the player

had very little agency or had quite a bit of agency, depending on what the player was doing. While playing a story mission, I was forced to take actions that went against the character I had chosen Arthur to be and was thus afforded very little player agency. In contrast, while outside a story mission, I was free to spend my time in many ways and with no particular direction and my agency was greatly increased. The most important result of this question, though, is that my agency was never absolute. I still existed within the game's world and could therefore only perform actions permissible by the game. To my knowledge, I could not, for instance, begin cutting down a tree and use the lumber to build a ranch for myself, as that was not something the game permitted. I return, again, to the idea of directed freedom and its clear application in this game. *RDR2* did provide a very large world with a wealth of activities to occupy players. But it still existed within prescribed boundaries and limits. The player's freedom was, at times, extensive, but it was never complete.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked, in what ways does *RDR2* challenge, or uphold, the tropes of the Western genre regarding masculinity and whiteness? The short answer is, much like the answer to the first research question, *RDR2* does very little to challenge these tropes and, in fact, leans upon them extensively. As I wrote earlier in Chapter 2, while discussing the Western genre, Westerns largely feature themes concerning: (a) autonomy and freedom, (b) community security, (c) reluctant violence, and (d) masculinity. This section focuses on these four tropes and examines each of them individually, as *RDR2* upheld each and did nothing to significantly challenge any of them. Of the three research questions, the third research question featured the fewest codes.

Autonomy and freedom. First, much of *RDR2* featured a theme of autonomy and freedom. To be coded as such, a scene must have included mention or behaviors that showcased a character's desire for freedom, to not be beholden, but to be independent. For instance, while on one mission with John, Arthur tells John to settle down and to try to figure out who he is. Arthur lets John know that he is currently trying to "be" several men, but he needs to be one; he needs to be his true self. In this moment, Arthur is urging John to break free of whatever social expectations he is currently experiencing in order to step into the life he wants; he is telling John to be free.

In another case, Dutch discusses his plans for the gang with Arthur, telling Arthur that he wants to take the gang west where they can be "wild and free." They will be free from the persecution of the Pinkertons and from the oppression of wealthy men, like Leviticus Cornwall. This is a clear example of the importance of autonomy and freedom to Dutch and his company. Indeed, many of the story missions the player undertakes as Arthur involve earning enough money for the gang[27] with the ultimate goal of moving the gang to an unspecified western region where they can build their community. Dutch repeatedly waxes on about his dream of a free community in which they, the gang, are not beholden to any government, laws, or social expectations. They will be free to live as they choose. Instead of meaningfully challenging the trope of freedom in Westerns, *RDR2* makes freedom the explicit goal of several characters.

Community security. The above discussion of autonomy and freedom brings me to the second trope of community security. Westerns often feature a small community beset by an outside danger. For instance, in the film *The Magnificent Seven* (Black, Birnbau, & Fuqua,

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[27] In the game, whenever a player completes a story mission in which they completed a robbery or otherwise earned money for the gang, a portion of the money goes into the gang's coffers while the characters who completed the job split the rest. This is the primary source of the gang's funding.

2016), the small town at the center of the film is fending off a murderous mining baron who has raised a small army to push the townsfolk out of their homes. A similar theme plays out in the film *Tombstone* (Jacks, Daniel, Misiorowski, & Cosmatos, 1993), in which a gang of outlaws massacres a portion of a small town before being confronted by a group led by a retired Wyatt Earp. In both films (i.e., *The Magnificent Seven* and *Tombstone*), the protagonists must protect their community from external threats. *RDR2* is no different from these two films in this regard. Arthur, time and again, places himself between the gang's members and outside threats. On one mission, Arthur is confronted by some Pinkerton agents who threaten Arthur and the rest of the gang. Arthur immediately returns to camp and informs Dutch who ultimately decides the gang must leave the area to avoid a confrontation.

In another case, early in the game, Arthur and company attack a stronghold of the O'Driscolls. Dutch justifies this attack saying that the O'Driscolls represent a grave threat to the safety of the gang, and thus their presence in the area must be removed in order to protect the gang. Another clear example of protecting the community occurs when Arthur and a few other gang members rescue their fellow gang member, Sean. Sean was captured when the gang fled Blackwater before the game began. Blackwater is the town in which the disastrous botched robbery took place before the game kicks off. Throughout much of a player's time in *RDR2*, they are wanted criminals in the Blackwater area. During this mission, entitled "The First Shall be Last," Arthur and his allies track Sean to a camp in the wilderness, battling bounty hunters along the way. Eventually, Arthur is victorious and is reunited with his friend, and the community is intact once more.

A final instance of protecting the gang occurs when Arthur and Uncle (just Uncle) take several of the women gang members into Valentine. On this trip, two of the women, Tilly and

Karen, find themselves in situations in which Arthur intervenes.[28] First, Tilly is confronted in an

alleyway by a stranger. Tilly and the stranger begin to argue, before Arthur steps in and tells the

stranger to leave Tilly alone. At this point, it is not entirely clear what the confrontation was

about, other than Tilly was being aggressed upon. Arthur's duty, and thus the player's duty, at

this point in the mission, is to scare the stranger away, which he does with a growl and a

menacing gun. Shortly after, Arthur goes to find Karen. Karen has found a man to pay her in

exchange for sexual favors, so the two adjourn to a nearby hotel room. When Arthur nears the

room, he hears a commotion and breaks the door open to find the man hitting Karen. Arthur flies

into a rage and beats the man severely. The man protests that he is "getting what he paid for." To

which Arthur responds, "You ain't paying to hit her you goddamn animal." In both instances,

Arthur took it upon himself to intervene and protect the gang from external threats, as the

protagonist in a Western *ought* to do. The gang is his community and the external threats consist

of organized dangers, such as Pinkertons or O'Driscolls, to less organized, but still dangerous

people like angry townsfolk or sexual predators.

Reluctant violence. The third trope focuses on *how* the community is secured and

protected. In Westerns, the protagonist usually employs violence to protect the community, albeit

reluctantly. This trope features the protagonist engaging in violent acts, while having misgivings

about the violence. In *RDR2*, Arthur is the primary example of this trope. At several instances in

the game, Arthur discusses what it means to be a good man and whether he can be a good man

with all the "robbin' and killin'" he has done. As I wrote earlier in this chapter concerning story

missions with Micah, Arthur laments the fact that so many people died at their hands while

breaking Micah out of jail, or while the two of them robbed a stagecoach together. In those two

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[28] Please refer to Appendix B for a list of characters.

missions alone, Arthur and Micah killed, or took part in the death of, approximately 60 souls, a fact Arthur is quick to point out to Micah. Arthur tells Micah that his actions were reckless, and that Micah is a danger and a fool. In these instances, Arthur is both protecting the gang and expressing his misgivings about the violence. It appears that Arthur would prefer to do these jobs without committing murder.

There is also overlap here with a theme from the first research question, the "code of violence." In this case, Arthur's misgivings result from the fact that these violent acts did not really adhere to the *code of violence*; in his eyes, Micah's penchant for wanton violence puts the gang at risk and, thus, goes against the code. In fact, of all the killings I performed as Arthur, the only ones he seemed to celebrate were when I attacked a gathering of KKK members. In every other instance, Arthur seemed to perform the violence because it was necessary, not because he wanted to; his violence was of a reluctant sort, particularly ironic as the game directs Arthur to perform much of this violence. Arthur protected the gang with the means at his disposal, but when those means necessitated violence, he would reluctantly comply. The goal here was not for the members of the gang community to become *civilized* per se and begin following the law; instead, the goal was for the gang to live comfortably, in a way that was acceptable to them. Violence was simply the tool they most often used to work towards this goal.

Masculinity. The final trope of Westerns that I discuss in this chapter is that of masculinity. As I noted above, masculinity is a huge part of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, from the way Arthur can dress, to the way he sounds and looks, to the actions he is tasked with performing on a given story mission. In every single instance, Arthur is a stereotypical masculine man in a Western. He is rugged, strong, violent, heterosexual, aggressive, and protective. He is powerful and respected in his community, a community he gladly bleeds for and has taken more

than one bullet for. In fact, if you would refer to the Cowboy Code (again, see Appendix A for a reminder), Arthur upholds many facets of this code of Western masculinity. He is gentle with children, taking the only child in the gang, Jack, on a fishing trip and teaching him about catching and releasing. He is respectful of women, as long as they do not violate the code of violence and offer him or the gang harm. Referring to Arthur's intervention in Tilly and Karen's assaults, discussed above, Arthur is not only protecting the gang, he is protecting the women of the gang. The big, strong man has rescued the damsels in distress, literally.

Summary of research question 3. The third research question asked, in what ways does *RDR2* challenge, or uphold, the tropes of the Western genre regarding masculinity and whiteness. To summarize, like the other research questions concerning challenging attitudes or tropes, *RDR2* does not significantly challenge the tropes of the Western genre of entertainment. Instead, it reifies several, including autonomy and freedom, community security, reluctant violence, and masculinity. Through Arthur's actions and the messages from other behaviors, it is quite clear to players that these tropes are common themes among the gameplay of *RDR2*.

Chapter Summary

Analyzing the data gathered from *Red Dead Redemption 2* provided answers to each of the research questions posed in this dissertation research. In short, the game does little to challenge existing concepts of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, or Western tropes. The characters in *RDR2* are aggressive, violent, rugged, strong, and racist. They desire freedom and strive to protect their community. They are stereotypical, Western characters. In addition, the game oscillates widely on the amount of player agency granted to players. If a player is on a story mission, their autonomy is limited drastically and, at times, the game removes it entirely. If

the player is not on a story mission, then they are granted a good deal more agency, though it still exists within the bounds laid down by the developers.

Chapter 5 discusses and interprets the findings from this chapter further; drawing connections with existing literature, as well as outlining possible future research paths to expand the findings of this project. Finally, limitations of this research are discussed.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this research project, I examined ways in which a popular, modern video game created masculinity and whiteness using the programmed interactions of the game's characters and how the game challenged or reified tropes of the Western genre. I also investigated the ways in which this game, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*; Rockstar Games, 2018), provided or denied the player agency in the game. While a number of researchers have examined concepts of gender and race in a broad sense (e.g., Behm-Morawitz, 2017; Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014; Brock, 2011; Cunningham, 2018; Ivory, 2006; Kondrat, 2015; Leonard, 2006; Mafe, 2015; Murray, 2016; Nevarro-Remesal, 2018; Russworm, 2018; Scharrer, 2004; Shaw, 2018), research into the ways in which masculinity and whiteness coexist within a game, is not prevalent, especially within the discipline of Communication Studies. Thus, this study aimed to address the gap in the scholarship by exploring the messages between characters in *RDR2* and the ways in which those messages acted to create different aspects of identity (i.e., masculinity and whiteness). To that end, this study was guided by three research questions: How are masculinity and whiteness discursively constructed through the programmed interactions of the characters of *RDR2*? (RQ1); How is the player given (or denied) in-game agency in *RDR2*? (RQ2); and, In what ways does *RDR2* challenge, or uphold, the tropes of the Western genre regarding masculinity and whiteness? (RQ3).

To answer the research questions posed in this dissertation project, I employed a digital ethnographic method. This involved a careful playthrough of *RDR2*, during which I took copious notes, screen captures, and video clips for analysis. I also replayed important missions or story "episodes," multiple times and in different ways, in order to more fully gather data from the game. Once I was finished with the playthrough component of this research, I began to analyze

the data using thematic analysis by identifying and categorizing patterns within the set (Braun &

Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006). During this process, I returned to the game as necessary to clarify

moments of context. The previous chapter discussed the results of this data collection. In this

final chapter, I endeavor to more fully interpret those findings. Thus, the next section: (1)

summarizes the findings from Chapter 4, before discussing the (2) theoretical and (3) practical

implications of the results. I then discuss the (4) limitations of this study, as well as ways I can

continue this line of scholarship in (5) future research. Finally, I provide my closing thoughts

about this project.

Summary of Findings

In examining *RDR2* for answers to the research questions posed above, my findings

essentially came down to one idea: *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) does *not* challenge existing

notions of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, or tropes in the Western genre in any meaningful

way. Further, the single-player game often strips players of most of their agency, in order to fully

tell the game's narrative.

Overall, I discovered that *RDR2* focuses much of its narrative on the actions of Arthur

Morgan who is, at most times, under the direct control of the player. In constructing its depiction

of masculinity, *RDR2* relies heavily on something I termed the "code of violence," in that the

game offers the player rewards or punishments depending on the violence they enact (or refuse

to enact). For instance, in some cases, the player may rob a passerby and be punished for it by

the game with a bounty on their head. In other cases, the player may commit mass murder as part

of a story mission and be rewarded with a new weapon or piece of equipment. Through the

punishments and rewards of the game, in addition to the reactions from other characters (e.g.,

horrified, praising, etc.), the player is shown the code of violence and gradually socialized into

adopting it as a structure of behavior. The game also constructs masculinity through showcasing the physical strength and resilience of its characters, Arthur in particular. Arthur is often depicted performing feats that would require great physical strength, such as carrying a full-size deer carcass while jogging through knee-deep snow. Other characters show their physical resilience, such as John being attacked by wolves early in the game. The gang shows mental resilience by surviving through the many trials they have faced from Pinkertons and other law enforcement. Overall, the game's characters construct masculinity in the form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987).

The game also reifies concepts of whiteness by accepting whiteness as the norm. The main character, as well as the majority of supporting characters, are all White. At times, the game pays lip service to ideas of racial equality, though these are rare and never developed to any great degree. For instance, while journeying through the state of Leymone in the southeast part of *RDR2*'s world, clearly modeled after the southern United States, I, as Arthur, occasionally ran into a meeting of the KKK. These random encounters usually occurred at night and consisted of either a cross burning or a new member initiation. At times I chose to attack the ceremony, to explore the interaction, and the Arthur quipped (through a scripted line, with no input from me) that these people were "goddamn hooded bastards." Presumably the line is supposed to show that Arthur does not support the actions of the organization, but this is never explicitly discussed in any other instance. In essence, it is a throwaway line during a random event that the player might not even choose to take part in. So, at times, it does appear that *RDR2* offers brief situations that seem to challenge whiteness, but these are always small and relatively insignificant compared to the rest of the game's overwhelming support of whiteness.

In terms of player agency (RQ2), the game oscillated wildly from one extreme to another. While not engaged in a story mission, I was free to do almost anything I wanted, provided the game's world physically allowed it. That is, I could not fly or dig a hole and make an underground bunker because those actions were not allowed within the parameters set by the game. So, while I may not have had *complete* freedom, as I did have to operate within the bounds of the game, I did have a great deal of agency when deciding how to spend my time in the world of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. For instance, I could roam the map on horseback or ride a train from station to station. I could hunt alligators in a swamp, peacefully fish in a river or lake, or go hunting for hidden chests of gold bars. However, once I began a story mission, much of my agency was stripped away, and I was forced to play the game and character in a way dictated by the mission and, thus, the developers of the game. As I noted in Chapter 4, I chose to play Arthur as non-violent whenever possible; however, most missions forced me to engage in acts of reckless and wanton violence in order to fulfill the requirements of the story mission (and to keep the game progressing forward). Therefore, the game provided wildly different levels of player agency; either in abundance or nearly none at all, depending on whether I was engaged in a story mission or not.

Finally, in terms of tropes of the Western genre (RQ3), the game upholds notions of autonomy and freedom, community security, reluctant violence, and masculinity. Throughout the playthrough, I was repeatedly exposed to instances in which Dutch's gang expressed how important their freedom was to their community and how they would do nearly anything to ensure both the autonomy of their group and its safety. Further, while the player was forced to perform these acts of violence as demanded by story missions, Arthur often expressed reluctance or remorse about these acts, though he continued to participate, as he saw it necessary for the

good of the community. Arthur often questioned whether this disqualified him from being a good man and wondered when the killing would stop. Finally, the game also reified notions of masculinity as typically seen in Westerns. Arthur was a burly, rough, and rugged *man*. These findings and their implications are further discussed in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Theoretical Implications

This study adds further evidence to the veritable mountain of information showing the existence of hegemonic masculinity and the ways it is portrayed as natural behavior, rather than socialized behavior. Further, within this research, I found data in support of the idea that hegemonic masculinity utilizes violence in order to maintain its hegemony. Second, this project offers an example of how mass media texts can work to promote and reify dominant cultural ideologies such as hegemonic masculinity and whiteness (Steeves, 1987) and why players might engage with such a game. These ideas are explored further below.

Hegemonic masculinity and violence. The primary theoretical contribution of this research is yet further evidence of the existence of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). As a reminder, hegemonic masculinity is a particular type of masculinity, popularly known as "toxic masculinity," which situates itself atop a hierarchy of gender (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Katz, 2006; Kimmel, 2012). Two prominent components of *RDR2*, aggression and self-reliance, are key characteristics of this type of masculinity (Kelly, 2016). For instance, the single largest component of my data was the overwhelming number of instances of violence conducted by the player character and his comrades (Micah in particular). In fact, expressing sorrow or reluctance about engaging in these violent acts was often met with derision or scorn, emphasizing the *rightness* of these violent acts as requisites of manly behavior (Raesch, Lee, & Cooper, 2015). Further, this research emphasizes the importance of violence as a necessary component of

masculinity, in that the characters of *RDR2* often utilized violence to uphold their positions and power, both within the gang and within the larger world of the game. The emphasis on violent power supports the notion that hegemonic masculinity requires "overt displays of force and power" in order to maintain its position in the hierarchy it has established (Hardin et al., 2009, p. 184). In *RDR2*, violence was *the tool* used by the gang in order to maintain order and accomplish their goals. Through threatening and enacting physical violence, Arthur and company managed to establish themselves as a powerful organization in the world of *RDR2*. The more violent a man was within the context of the game, the more powerful he became in the gang.

In addition, this study provides evidence that, within hegemonic masculinity, there is a "correct" set of behaviors. Much like Raesch et al. (2015) describe, this research revealed a clear expectation of behavior by the characters of *RDR2*. As discussed in the findings of the first research question, violence for violence's sake was frowned upon, though not reason enough for expulsion from the community. However, violence in order to protect the community of the gang, or members of the gang's interest, was very much expected. Further, this type of violence was rewarded through in-game mechanics, such as providing the player character with monetary compensation or new equipment and weapons for committing acts of violence successfully. As noted above, at the end of one of the most violent missions, "Blessed are the Meek," Arthur, and thus the player, are rewarded for their part in the massacre of Strawberry with a second holster so they can carry more weapons of destruction.

In this manner, *RDR2* gradually socializes the player into performing hegemonic masculine behaviors and then *rewards* that behavior. Simultaneously, the game *punishes* those players who choose (or attempt to choose) to play Arthur in a kinder, less violent manner. For instance, in the mission "Pouring Forth Oil," the player is tasked with stealing a wagon full of oil

from a nearby factory. The area where the wagons are located is heavily guarded and I attempted several times to take the wagon without using force. I hopped fences, distracted sentries, and scampered off when my presence was noted. After several failed attempts, subsequent deaths, and restarts, I was finally able to flee with the wagon. I was grievously wounded in the escape, but I made it without attacking any of the guards. To further test an idea, I tried the mission again, but this time, I used a violent assault and was immediately successful. I found this mission much easier when I attacked the guards than when I tried to avoid them. The gameplay incentivized violence and thus I became more accustomed to the idea that violence was the answer.

In fact, Arthur Morgan fits the literature's (e.g., Hardin et al., 2009; Hatfield, 2010) description of hegemonic masculinity very well. First, as indicated by my analysis of the data, Arthur is physically powerful and resilient. He is also aggressive and avoids appearing feminine or soft, as exemplified by the trail of bruised, broken, and bloody bodies left in his wake. This set of behaviors and way of being fits Raesch et al.'s (2015) explanation of hegemonic masculinity perfectly. Arthur is also White and overtly heterosexual, which are additional factors of hegemonic masculinity (Kluch, 2015). As a player, I spent most of my time with Arthur and was rarely given a choice in how he would address another character or speak in general beyond a binary of "Greet" or "Antagonize." Thus, the manner in which Arthur interacted with other characters was largely the result of the game developers' choices. Intentionally or not, the developers at Rockstar have created in Arthur Morgan a perfect example of the hegemonically masculine, Western-style man.

Notably, in my view, the most interesting story missions were the ones in which Arthur reconnected with his old love, Mary, who has since gone on to marry another man. In missions

involving Mary, Arthur displays a tenderness and compassion that is often hidden or veiled by the numerous violent acts the other story missions require of him. One of the primary reasons for my interest in this short series of missions involving Mary is due to the contrast they have with the rest of the game. While most of the game requires Arthur to slay his way through a set of objectives, the missions concerning Mary are thoughtful and emotionally evocative. This short series of missions is essentially a spot of calm among the rest of the game. The difference is quite blatant and thus, alluring. Arthur's behavior in these missions serves as a stark reminder of the type of man he is during the rest of the game: violent and aggressive.

Mass media and cultural ideologies. As was pointed out in Chapter 4, this study found no significant evidence that *Red Dead Redemption 2* meaningfully challenges dominant cultural notions of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness. Just as hegemonic masculinity fortifies the social position of men, whiteness does the same for White people (Asante, 2019). Both hegemonic masculinity and whiteness utilize existing power structures to secure their social position and then employ cultural artifacts, in this case video games, to create the notion that they are both natural, rather than socially occurring. Ultimately, if something is natural, then it is much more difficult to disrupt and challenge, two major goals of feminist theory (Butler, 2006).

To that end, *RDR2* features these two notions, hegemonic masculinity and whiteness, in such prevalence that *RDR2* can arguably be seen as a tool of both concepts. Despite claims to the contrary, games are very clearly political in nature as they are created by people with politics and thus, video games are both personal *and* political (Sicart, 2011). It is very clear to see the ways in which *RDR2* upholds these conceptual and political notions through the usage of Arthur Morgan as its protagonist. Again, Arthur Morgan quite literally embodies both hegemonic masculinity and whiteness and the game reifies those concepts through his required actions during story

missions. The player is socialized into understanding that these behaviors are *correct* because they are the behaviors that garner the best rewards. In contrast, if a player chooses not to behave within the constraints of hegemonic masculinity, the game punishes the player.

While *RDR2* does have characters who are not White men, these characters are always relegated to a secondary or tertiary role. For instance, of all the women in the game, Sadie Adler is the only one who is depicted as somewhat of an equal with the men of the gang, likely due to her behavior as foul-mouthed, violent, and ill-tempered. Sadie Adler is seen as an equal to the men because she acts like the men.

Of the characters of color, Javier, Charles, and Lenny are the three most prominent, but they still exist as sidekicks to Arthur. Further, Charles, who is half-Black and half-Native American, is himself a troubling character whose parents fulfill stereotypical Western tropes, in that his Black father was an alcoholic and his Native American mother was kidnapped by White soldiers. Not to mention that Charles is the best tracker in the gang, reflecting a stereotype in many Westerns that Native Americans are excellent hunters. Effectively, whiteness is taken as the norm for members of the gang, an "invisible norm" at that (Grimes, 2002, p. 382).

Further, discussions of race among the characters exist, but they are fleeting and do not develop into anything meaningful. For example, in an early scene a couple hours into the game, as the gang travels from the mountains to the plains, they witness a group of Native Americans watching their progress from a clifftop. Hosea, a lieutenant in the gang, tells Arthur that the Native Americans are "Poor bastards. We really screwed them over." Although Hosea explains that the soldiers who moved the Native Americans from the area were none too gentle, there is no real development of this notion, and thus the player is free to disregard it as unimportant, as it is literally a handful of lines amongst thousands of lines or messages. Without further knowledge

on the player's part (i.e., knowledge concerning the colonization of the United States and the atrocities committed against its native peoples), these lines are effectively meaningless.

A fascinating aspect of the van der Linde gang is the way they refer to each other, often fondly, as "degenerates." While the word itself has a negative connotation within the larger social system, Arthur and company use the word to identify themselves as "others" existing outside the trappings of high society and, often, the law. This is reminiscent of how viewers of *Duck Dynasty* use the word "redneck" (Holladay, 2018). *Duck Dynasty* fans see the Robertson family (the family the show focuses on) as redneck, even though they are wealthy because redneck is a mentality. This is much the same as *RDR2*'s degenerates. Though, at times, they may perform kind acts or form strong relationships with each other, they operate as criminals and outlaws, something no truly respectable person would do. Thus, they are degenerates, but this does not make them evil.

Finally, returning to Dutch's paternalism, Dutch often acts in such as a way as to lift up the members of his gang, to show them what a benevolent and fair leader he is, another aspect of Whiteness (Lacy, 2010). This paternalism, this supposed care, towards his subjects, as it were, showcases Dutch's priorities: he does not truly care about the members of his community, their needs are subordinate to his own. This supposed care allows Dutch to exploit and control the members of his gang through manipulation of seeming neutrality (Liu & Pechenkina, 2015), a key component of Whiteness.

Player engagement. Why then do players engage so readily with a game that depicts such violence, toxicity, and racism? While the answer to such a question is outside the purview of this study, existing theories may offer some guidance. In this instance, I think uses and gratification theory (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973) is applicable, in that this theory offers an

explanation for why such a game might be so appealing. The idea behind uses and gratification theory is a notion that helps to explain how and why people engage with media in order to gratify or satisfy their needs (Katz et al., 1973). Those needs may be things such as seeking information or fulfilling interpersonal needs, but the theory provides a framework by which scholars may examine media usage. For players of *RDR2*, the need being satisfied may be that of fantasy fulfillment or escapism. While I did not explore the various side activities within the game, such as treasure hunts and hunting, there are many activities to keep players occupied outside of the main narrative missions. As I said, these moments between missions are where the player is afforded the most choice and this extreme agency might be perceived as very gratifying to players.

Further, this study poses questions about not only why players engage with *RDR2*, but also *how* they engage with the game (i.e., how they play their characters). In my case, I tried my best to play Arthur in a non-violent manner because doing bad things makes me feel bad. My need to feel good about myself, or at least not bad, was gratified by performing beneficial or honorable actions. This sort of playing, acting in a non-violent manner in a violent setting, can also be conceptualized as a form of resistance by the player; an effort to disrupt the overarching system of violence and reward. This is another form of player agency, one in which the developers can work to dissuade the player of but cannot completely take away. In my case, I was often forced to put these non-violent principles aside when forced into certain story situations, but I returned to them as quickly as possible. Of course, further research to support these concepts would be necessary, specifically with data gathered from the players of the game themselves in order to corroborate this idea.

Zillmann (2003) offers an idea other than uses and gratification about this very issue: affective disposition theory. This theory argues a person can have a strong emotional connection to a media artifact. In this instance, players of a game featuring misogyny and racism may connect to the game, despite the drawbacks, due to the emotional impact of the game. Indeed, the emotions evoked by media, in this case, the video game, ought not be discounted by scholars, as intriguing data lies within those evocative moments. A person may play a game because they are invested in the characters; they want the "good guy" to triumph over the "bad guy" and fear negative outcomes encountered by the protagonist (Janz, 2005). This extends to the way in which players evaluate characters. In Chapter 4, I discussed Micah and how, in my estimation, he is a bad human being. This type of reaction and condemnation of a fictional character is the result of a strong affect towards Micah, one which resulted from the programmed interactions of Micah with other characters. However, affective disposition theory assumes a fairly passive media consumer, rather than the active participation of a video game player (Vorderer, 2003).

The results of this study also bring to mind cultivation theory, which suggests that media content influences how consumers of that content perceive and engage with reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). In conjunction with the findings of this dissertation, cultivation theory would suggest that repeatedly engaging with a game, such as *RDR2*, which contains strong themes of racism and toxic masculinity, would lead players to believe racist and violent behaviors are the *norm*. This is in line with the way hegemonic masculinity and whiteness operate, in that these systems of power work to convince people that being a White man (and a specific type of man; i.e., strong, aggressive, etc.) is also the norm. Indeed, evidence to this very idea is supported by Behm-Morawitz and Ta (2014) who found

"the cultivation of racial and ethnic stereotypes from video games occurs, particularly in relation to Whites' perceptions of Blacks" (p. 12).

Clearly, this study offers information about the depictions of the identities of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness in a AAA game, one whose success was immense and immediate (Takahashi, 2019). The primary theoretical contributions of the study are further evidence of the existence of hegemonic masculinity and its links to violence, as well a demonstration of the dissemination of cultural ideologies by mass media artifacts. This study also raises interesting questions concerning the reasons players engage with games. Beyond the theoretical, this research project offers several practical implications detailed in the next section.

Practical Implications

This research project has important practical implications for games scholars, feminist critics, and generally anyone who has a passion for video games. First, I think this study outlines a strong model for conducting long-term, in-depth studies of games (and gaming) by analyzing and critiquing multiple aspects of the text, rather than any one component. Game studies is an area of research undergoing significant growth at this time and this study provides further structure upon which that research can continue to develop. Much of game studies research currently approaches the area from a critical viewpoint (Chess, 2016; Shaw, 2018), which this research builds upon. Further, this study demonstrates that digital ethnography is an effective tool by which game scholars can gather a large amount of data through an in-depth exploration of a game.

Second, this research builds upon the work of other feminist game scholars attempting to decenter the hegemonically masculine and White protagonists, so often found at the heart of video games. While playing, I wondered what *RDR2* would look like as a feminist game and I

could not see it – not as it is currently structured. Indeed, *RDR2* would require a complete overhaul of the main narrative, and likely require the implementation of much more choice/agency for the player, while completing those narrative moments. There is still much work to be done, by both the game scholar and the game developer, in order to create games with less racism and sexism. Too often, such tropes are relied upon as storytelling devices in the name of "historical accuracy," and *RDR2* is no different. This game utilizes hegemonic masculinity and whiteness to tell a tried and true story. *RDR2* does provide a play space in which a person can escape into the fantasy of being an outlaw, but the space imposes a fairly strict set of rules, which force the player to reify behaviors of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness, thus reproducing problematic social constructs (Russworm, 2018).

The final, and perhaps most significant, practical implication is the influence that video games, like *Red Dead Redemption 2*, has on its players and consumers. As prior research has established (e.g., Burgess et al., 2011; Yao et al., 2009), there is a link between depictions of stereotypes of race and gender in video games and racist and misogynistic thoughts and behaviors in practice. As a reminder, these earlier studies (i.e., Burgess et al., 2011; Yao et al., 2009) revealed that consuming video game depictions of racist and sexist material and tropes was linked to racist and sexist thoughts in the players. As discussed in Chapter 1, a large amount of research exists examining links between violence in video games and violence in reality, but those links are not clearly established. However, it is concerning that attitudes and thoughts regarding racism and sexism *are* swayed by the depictions of such behavior in video games. Thus, this study supports consumers of video games utilizing a critical buying process. Buyers ought to be aware of the type of game being purchased and played, as *RDR2* is rife with toxic masculinity, violence, and racist/sexist depictions. Currently, the Entertainment Software Rating

Board (ESRB), the organization who provides ratings for games – much like the Motion Picture

Association of America provides ratings for movies – has rated *RDR2* as an "M" for Mature

gamers. On their website, the ESRB says games with a rating of M have content suitable for

gamers above the age of 17; these games often feature violent or sexual content, blood and/or

gore, and strong language (Rating Categories, n.d.). Interestingly, none of the ESRB's rating

system contain assessments of explicit racism and/or sexism. The argument could be made these

concepts (i.e., racism and/or sexism) may fall under the "strong language" component of the

rating, but more likely, that component refers to cursing (or vulgar language use), rather than

racist and/or sexist character depictions. It would be a beneficial component to these ratings if

they were to begin including more specific content advisories so those purchasing games in the

United States would be aware of racist or sexist depictions within the game. In Europe, a

different rating system exists, known as PEGI (Pan European Gaming Information), which rates

games with both an age recommendation, as well as content warnings such as gambling, sex, or

discrimination, something the United States' ESRB lumps into a single category (i.e., PEGI,

n.d.). Adapting this system to games released in the United States would be immensely useful to

those trying to making gaming purchasing decisions.

  More than ever then, the onus is on the developers and publishers of such games to

simply do better. The stories told in these types of games are not novel by any means. As shown

by my discussion of tropes in the Western genre, *RDR2* does not accomplish anything new with

its depictions of race and/or gender. In fact, *RDR2*'s depictions of race and gender align very

closely with the existing tropes and reify the notions of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness,

serving to further shore up the dominant position of both social identities. As has been said by

many researchers and critics before me, developers must make more inclusive and thus, better games.

Limitations

As is the case with any research project, this dissertation is bound by several limitations. The first limitation is the research method; namely, the digital ethnography was only applied to one game, *Red Dead Redemption 2*. While the game is extremely popular, with millions of players, it is still only one game. Thus, the findings of this study may not readily be extended and/or applied to other games. While generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research (Tracy, 2010), creating research that might be applicable to similar research sites and artifacts is useful, as other scholars or future projects continue to explore the research area. Thus, as this study only examined one game, the applicability of these findings to other games might very well be limited. Similarly, as *RDR2* is created by Rockstar Games, given the company's history, discussed above, as a purveyor of games containing misogynistic and racist characterizations, it is no surprise this research project revealed the data it did. Indeed, as gaming still *conceptually* exists as a White male space (even though that is not the reality of the culture), major game releases will often take that population for granted and product content accepted by the White male gamer, thus limiting studies concerning those games. Should a researcher seek to explore information about other depictions of gender and race beyond the White male perspective, those games would likely be produced, in large part, by smaller, more independent game developers. To be clear, this is a generalization and there are definitely small, independent games facing several of the content problems discussed in this project, and there are large games that do not, but should a scholar be interested in non-hegemonic depictions of masculinity, my suggestion would be to start with an independent game first.

Further, I only explored the single-player narrative of the game. In this version of the game, I played through the story as created by the directors of Rockstar using the characters from their story. In late November 2018, an online version of the game was released allowing players the option of choosing the single-player or multiplayer worlds when logging in (McWhertor, 2018). Many popular games feature a very large multiplayer component which would obviously shift how players would interreact with the game. Since the release of *RDR2*, the single-player story has remained complete with no new material released, but the multiplayer game has received repeated updates with new content every few months (Marshall, 2020). Thus, the argument could be made that the single-player version of *RDR2* is not the version that most players engage with, thus limiting the expansiveness of this study.

The final limitation to be noted here is my previous experience with the game and the fact this study was only done by one researcher. While I did not intend to enter the data collection process with a wholly open mind, as my questions were significantly informed by previous research and theoretical knowledge, I did have previous experience with the game, which undoubtedly influenced my interpretations of the data. Not only that, but I was the lone researcher on the project, and my interpretations were the *only* interpretations of the data (save the instances wherein which I sought my advisor's or committee members' advice). I note this to indicate that a parallel project examining the same research questions, but with researchers unfamiliar with *RDR2*, might likely produce somewhat different results. However, I do think there would be a large overlap in the results, as the data I present and interpret paints a very clear picture of what sort of identity representation is present within the game.

Future Research

Despite its limitations, I am confident in the results presented in this dissertation study and know there is more to be mined from this research, and research like it, that would contribute to, and inform, future projects and studies. The world of games and game research is relatively new in the timeline of the academy, specifically within the discipline of Communication Studies and thus, there is still much to be learned. Using this study as an example, the project could be split to focus on either hegemonic masculinity, or whiteness more specifically. In addition, a project utilizing this data set and *RDR2*'s presentation of whiteness could explore the notion of colonialism as it was presented in a modern age game set in the era of westerns and rampant colonialism in the United States. This research could also be extended to include the multiplayer side of the game, the version of the game in which players interact and play with each other in the same digital space.

Released about a month after the single-player, narrative-focused version, the multiplayer version is essentially a separate game from the version I studied. While *Red Dead Online* takes place in the same digital world as the single-player version, the multiplayer world does not contain the same story components. Since much of my criticism of the denial of player agency within *RDR2* came when the player entered a story mission, a world in which these story missions are not as present would automatically grant the player exponentially more agency.

In the multiplayer version, players create their own character and play in the same world as *RDR2*'s single-player version, but this is not a character who exists in the single-player version. Players have quite a bit more customization in terms of how the main character may look, including masculine or feminine looking bodies and different skin tones and facial features. While players do not have choice over a category explicitly called "race"; instead, they can

choose from a sliding scale of features in a category termed "heritage," which features several different stereotypical racial markers. In addition, in the multiplayer version, you may interact with other players who exist in the same digital space as you, for better or worse. As one author states about players of the online version, they "can customize their own Black characters, which is an exciting option for many players – that is until they actually go out into the world and interact with other people" (Hernandez, 2019, para. 5).

Such a study might examine how player agency is afforded or denied in this multiplayer world compared to that of the single-player world, or how perceptions of character race lead to differing character interactions by the players behind the character. My initial suspicion is that since much of a player's agency was stripped from them while engaging with the game's story, the multiplayer version of the game may actually offer quite a bit more agency, as the player can create their own character and is not pigeonholed into taking certain actions as dictated by story missions or predetermined narrative structures.

In that same vein, multiplayer games are immensely popular. Games such as *Fortnite*, *Call of Duty*, and *League of Legends* are some of the most-played games in the world (Vincent, 2019). Examining how these games create identity in their characters, and/or how these identities may be role-played by the players themselves, would be interesting. How these players interact with each other in an in-game capacity, as well as how they discuss the characters would prove illuminating. This would be another area of research in which digital ethnography would likely be quite fruitful as well as a more in-depth exploration of technological affordances (Gibson, 1986). Clearly there exists a space within games, especially open-world games such as *RDR2* to explore those notions. If the researcher was able to gain access to a group of game players through the game and engage in play with them, all sorts of information about why people play

games, how they engage with other players, the symbols and traditions they create, and the rules they follow would likely come to light.

In addition, if a researcher would want to conduct an in-depth analysis of games and their possible influence on players, then there may be no better way than to ask than the players themselves. Thus, future work utilizing focus groups or interviews with players could provide information and insights about the game, otherwise hidden to researchers viewing the activity from the outside. This could prove especially interesting should the researcher choose to focus on those participants who play games professionally. By 2023, analysts predict that the audience for esports[29] will reach nearly 650 million viewers and annual industry revenues will likely top $1 billion in 2020 and $1.5 billion by 2023 (Reyes, 2019). As sports studies is a growing area within Communication Studies, studies of esports would be a great addition as well. Clearly, there exists a large portion of the global population who is invested (sometimes literally) in esports teams and players. Conducting research with and about these teams would be fascinating.

Theoretically, there is still much to be desired in terms of games and feminism, as *RDR2* unfortunately displayed. Representation, hegemonic masculinity, and violence within the gaming industry are all areas that could use improvement. It would be an interesting project to closely examine games and gaming reviews to find games with strong feminist themes and examine what those games do differently than games like *RDR2*.

Conclusion

This digital ethnography of a successful AAA video game explored and examined the ways in which the characters of *RDR2* constructed masculinity and whiteness. Despite decades of criticism from game and feminist scholars (not to mention feminist game scholars), it is clear

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[29] Esports are professional video game competitions.

there is still much work to be done at the most prominent levels of gaming, in terms of representation and identity. Results from this project explicitly revealed the ways in which *RDR2* links masculinity and whiteness with violence and power and, indeed, uses those tools to uphold the structural concepts. The theoretical implications of the study showcase the ways in which a massively successful game does little to portray feminist notions of equality and empowerment and, in fact, regularly disempowers its players.

I firmly believe that the data rendered from this study is strong and lays a solid foundation upon which to build future research exploring communication and gaming, both in *Red Dead Redemption 2* and other games. I began this project out of a desire to connect two of my passions: games and communication. As game studies is a fairly new field of study in the academy, and the discipline of Communication Studies specifically, the room for future research is great. One challenge of this project was switching perspectives between that of the gamer and that of scholar and that is a research skill I would like to develop further by engaging in more studies such as this one. This project did show me that I can love games and enjoy them to a great degree, while also being very critical of them and hoping the industry as a whole improves its character representation in gaming products. This study and its findings demonstrate the importance and practicality of this work and I hope to further contribute to its growth in some facet as my career progresses. Yes, there are problems with video games and representation. But research and criticism like this can only help to improve this hobby that I treasure. As Arthur says, "We can't change what's done, we can only move on."

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Appendix A: Figures

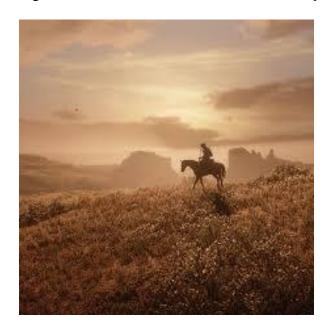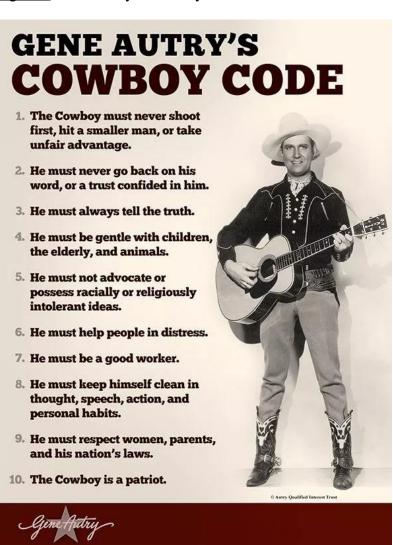<u>Figure 1</u>: A screenshot from *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

<u>Figure 2</u>: *Mist in Kanab Canyon, Utah* by Thomas Moran.

Figure 3: An AK-47 weapon skin from *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*.

Figure 4: Gene Autry's Cowboy Code.

Appendix B: People and Places

Red Dead Redemption 2 **Character List**

- Arthur Morgan – Lieutenant in Dutch's gang. The main playable character. The game is seen through his eyes.

- Dutch van der Linde – Leader of the gang. Raised Arthur from when Arthur was a young teen.

- Hosea Matthews – Another lieutenant. Older than Dutch, often acts as an adviser to Dutch.

- Bill Williamson – Member of the gang. A large, rough-around-the-edges sort.

- Javier Escuella – Member of the gang.

- John Marston – Member of the gang. Left the gang at some point for about a year and Arthur holds this abandonment against John. Becomes the playable character during the Epilogue and beyond.

- Charles Smith – Member of the gang. Mother was Native American, father was a freed slave.

- Micah Bell – Fairly new member of the gang. Prone to violence. Adored by Dutch but loathed by Arthur.

- Sadie Adler – Newest member of the gang. Rescued by Arthur, Dutch, and Micah early in the game. Eventually begins going on jobs with Arthur.

- Abigail Roberts – Member of the gang, wife of John and mother of Jack

- Jack Marston – Young son of John and Abigail

- Uncle – Member of the gang. Old prospector type.

- Lenny Summers – One of the newer gang members.

- Sean Macguire – Gang member. Is captured during the events of Blackwater.

- Mary-Beth Gaskill – Member of the gang.

- Tilly Jackson – Member of the gang.

- Leopold Strauss – Member of the gang. Runs the loan shark operation.

- Reverend Swanson – Member of the gang. Drinks a lot.

- Susan Grimshaw – Member of the gang. In charge of in-camp operations.

- Molly O'Shea – Member of the gang.

- Pearson – Gang's quartermaster and cook. Former Navy member.

- Colm O'Driscoll – Leader of the O'Driscoll Boys, a rival gang.

- Leviticus Cornwall – Wealthy oil and train baron.

- Mary Linton – Arthur's former love.

- Andrew Milton – Pinkerton agent.

Red Dead Redemption 2 **Town and Settlement List Pertinent to this Project**

- Annesburg – A forested coal mining town on the northeastern edge of the world map.

- Blackwater – A sizeable town in the southwest part of the map. This is the town the gang
  fled before the gang started after a botched robbery.

- Colter – An abandoned mining town in the northwest part of the map. Act 1 takes place
  in this area.

- Rhodes – A town in the state of Lemoyne, much of Act 3 is centered in this area. Located
  in the south-central part of the map.

- St. Denis – A large town in the state of Lemoyne, similar is aesthetic to New Orleans.
  Located in the southeast part of the map.

- Strawberry – A small logging town in the western part of the map.

- Valentine – A ranching town set in the middle of the map. Much of Act 2 takes place in this area.

- Visit https://rdr2map.com/ for a full map of the game. You can hide the icons by clicking "Hide All" on the left side. You can also hide the menus on the left and right by clicking the appropriate arrows next to those menus.