Red Dead Masculinity: Constructing a Conceptual Framework for Analyzing the Narrative and Message Found in Video Games

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Abstract

Rockstar's Red Dead Redemption *video game exemplifies a complex narrative that combines a video game's gameplay, story elements, and Western genre tropes. The narrative constructs a masculinity in opposition to social forces not only constructed in the video game world but also found in the physical world. This analysis uses transportation theory in combination with interactivity and identification processes to interpret the effects of the game's message of masculinity. Specifically, the analysis examines the terministic screen used by the game's main character. The terministic screen justifies morally questionable actions for the main character and for the player. The persuasiveness of the message is then considered in relationship to the unique characteristics of the video game medium that have the potential to initiate identification and identity management. By using* Red Dead Redemption *as a case study, explanations as to how and why a game's narrative and message may affect a player's value system are posited.*

Introduction

Video games have experienced substantial growth in the resources allocated to the development of game narratives. This trend stemmed from the findings that enjoyment relates to increased identification with video game characters, and enjoyment and identification can be reinforced

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through the use of narratives, especially when combined with improved technology and gameplay (Grimshaw, Charlton, & Jagger, 2011; Calleja, 2010; Murphy, 2004). In fact, so many improvements have been made in the narrative sophistication of video games that popular culture has taken notice (*1*) (Bissell, 2013). Scholars have noticed as well, recognizing the narratives' effect on immersion, sense and meaning-making, and enjoyment once narratives were coupled with the medium's interactive elements (Lee, Park, & Jin, 2006; Shapiro, Peña-Herborn, & Hancock, 2006).

Scholars, such as Crawford (2012) and Pargman and Jakobsson (2008), argue for the study of video games in respect to social contexts where many of these narratives have originated and where, conversely, the narratives are appropriated and influence the community and culture. Long (2009) believed video games contain media-messages applicable to gamers and the real-worlds they inhabit. Bogost (2008) argued that the rules, world, and processes of video games present a system "where cultural values themselves can be represented" (p. 119). These characteristics of the medium have led scholars to recognize that video games do not situate completely in one realm (Mäyrä, 2008). In many cases, the video game experience may be used to "inform conversations or social interactions based around other subject matter" (Crawford, 2012, p. 81). The difficulty is in identifying the pertinent aspects, processes, mechanics, and interplay of a specific game and player that allow for learning and meaning to cross a game's boundaries and enter the physical world.

This study examines the potential for the specific masculine construction found in Rockstar San Diego's (2010) *Red Dead Redemption* (*RDR*) to cross the game's boundaries and influence the worldview of the player. The game's interpretation of masculinity recommends a particular approach and response when faced with certain social forces and institutions that are not only found in the game-world but are also likely to be prominent forces recognizable in the 21ˢᵗ century real world of the player. This study explicates the process by which the narrative recommendation embedded in the game's version of masculinity allows the message to travel from the game-world to the player's physical world.

Red Dead Redemption was released on May 18, 2010 by Rockstar Games for the video game consoles PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. It can be described as a sandbox game, consisting of an open-world, third person, action/adventure American Western-themed video game. The game became quite popular, selling over 13 million copies as of February 2012 (Curtis, 2012). The game told the story of John Marston, part bounty hunter, outlaw, and cowboy, and his attempts to track down his former partners-in-crime. At the beginning of the game, Marston agreed to work with the government as the authorities have his wife and son in protective custody. He hoped that the government will release his wife and son and allow all of them to return to their farm once he has located his former accomplices.

RDR is a nuanced tale that fits within the realm of the Revisionist-Western genre and focuses on a masculine lifestyle in opposition to early 20ᵗʰ century societal forces and technological advancement. For *RDR*, societal change becomes the catalyst for compromising one's morality, for losing control over one's life, and for an almost constant struggle against the greed and corruption of others. The game depicts cruel societal forces: uncaring corporations, inhumane industrialization and technological advancement, and a government obsessed with expanding its power and reach. These forces exert demands on the protagonist, the player, and the game's supporting cast. The end result is a comment on the radically changing American society of the early 1900's. Through Marston, the main character, *RDR* addresses the challenges a male protagonist, typical of later era Westerns, must face and his rhetorical justifications for his choices and actions. In a deft manner, the game develops

these themes and Marston's perspective by utilizing dialogue during cut-scenes and the common video game template of goal-oriented missions.

In this study, textual analysis is used to examine how the game's narrative and gameplay creates a terministic screen for the main character (Burke, 1966). Burke (1966) described terministic screens as "any nomenclature [that] necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than to others" and these choices "affect the nature of our observations" (pp. 45–46). These interpretations of observations affect an individual's perspective and understanding of reality and persuade the individual to act on a particular perspective based on the terms (nomenclature) that created the screen or perspective much like the lens of a camera creating a screen through which a photographer interprets a scene or moment in time.

Marston chooses a particular terministic screen to perceive the world and justify morally questionable gameplay choices, such as murder. Moreover, the screen advances a narrative which crafts a version of masculinity that opposes powerful forces that are still influential in the 21st century. The persuasiveness and transferability of the message from game world to real world is then explored. The subsequent analysis posits that a combination of video gameplay and narrative can increase message receptivity, especially through the processes of transportation, interactivity, and identification. These processes can lead to identity management and change. If successful, transportation, interactivity, and identification allow the player to adopt Marston's terministic screen and apply it to physical world social contexts and human interactions. This process of game-message-persuasion-to-physical-world-application can be generalized to games similar to *RDR* and used an explanation of game-message internalization.

Klimmt, Hefner, Vorderer, Roth, and Blake (2010) have argued that "identification with player characters or player roles has not been studied with much rigor in communication" (p. 324). Shaw (2013) called for scholars to dig deeper into the process of identification, specifically, how and when a game invites interaction, how identification differs from identity, and when a player is more or less inclined to identify with a game or game's character. This study offers an approach for analyzing a game's narrative, underlying message, and the process of identification through the interplay of gameplay and narrative. Secondly, this lens connects the narrative and gameplay to physical world social contexts, attempting to explain the transferal process of a video game reality to a socially constructed one. In particular, this study concentrates on how the ideological message implicit in *RDR* may affect the player and alter values and beliefs (i.e., identity) applicable to the player's social contexts and human experience. The following sections present the theoretical framework which underpins the game-world to physical world transference. The subsequent sections present an overview of the masculinities commonly found in Westerns with the purpose of establishing the interpretative perspective for the analysis followed by an overview of *RDR's* plot and narrative. The final sections discuss and analyze the implications of the gameplay experience.

Conceptual Framework: From the Video Game World to the Physical World

Explicating the process by which a narrative message can be transferred from a video game to the physical world is essential for understanding the potential appropriation of a video game's perspective on the world. However, in order to do so, the framework must ameliorate the division between narratological (i.e., narrative and textual based analysis) and ludological (i.e., gameplay and game mechanics analysis) approaches to video game analysis (Kirkland, 2005). By combining transportation theory, interactivity, the process of video game identification, and Burke's terministic

screen, a conceptual framework can be constructed that may be useful for understanding how messages embedded in video game narratives can affect the player as a result of gameplay. Transportation theory concentrates on the narrative of a video game in a way theories such as immersion, engagement, and flow do not. Meanwhile, Burke's conceptualization of terministic screens allows for an explanation as to how the video game medium can increase receptivity and allow a player to internalize a game's message in a way that respects the performative nature of video games. By combining these theories, the conceptual framework offers an explanation as to how multiple game processes interact to create an impression on a player.

Part 1: Transportation Theory + Interactivity = Identification = Personal Relevance

Green and Brock (2000) defined a narrative as a story "that raises unanswered questions, presents unresolved conflicts, or depicts not yet completed activity; characters may encounter and then resolve a crisis or crises. A story line, with a beginning, middle, and end, is identifiable" (p. 701). A narrative experience refers to an individual's engagement with a narrative. To better understand narrative experiences, scholars have used transportation theory.

First articulated by Gerrig (1993) and later expanded by Green and Brock (2000), transportation theory explains the cognitive process by which an individual is affected by the drama of a surrogate protagonist found in a fictionalized world. In other words, an individual may be "[absorbed] into a story" through "imagery, affect, and attentional focus" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 70). When individuals engage with a narrative and experience transportation, a cognitive process occurs where the narrative world and its story affect physical-world experiences. That is, parts of the physical-world become inaccessible, and the transported person may experience emotions resulting from engagement with the narrative, the narrative's characters, and the world the characters inhabit. In fact, this experience may be so intense that the transported person can be changed by the experience. Green and Brock (2002) explicated that "transportation may reduce negative cognitive responding. Transported readers may be less likely to disbelieve or counter-argue story claims, and thus their beliefs may be influenced" (p. 702). Significantly, Green and Brock's (2002) assertion suggests that narratives have the potential to persuade in a way direct messaging cannot.

Even though transportation theory was originally developed to explain experiences of readers, Green and Brock (2002) believed transportation could occur whenever narrative information was communicated no matter what the medium. Particular to video game research, Schneider (2004) found that narratives increased identification, psychological, and physiological response and enjoyment. To increase the impact of the narrative on players and encourage engagement with the game's narrative, video games may include cut scenes, voice actors, and improved graphics (Buel, 2013). In *RDR,* the game mechanics reinforce engagement with the narrative as one cannot progress through the game, or open up the world, without progressing through the narrative. Krzywinska (2002), Grieb (2002), Marshall (2004), and Bogost (2008) recognized the bounding limits of the video game environment, the game rules, and the underlying structure of the game and gameplay in forcing or reinforcing engagement with the game's narrative. Engagement with the narrative increases the player's connection to the game and can encourage transportation. Buel (2013) supports the importance of narrative, especially Hollywood studio or system narratives like the one found in *RDR* as these genre and Hollywood narratives encourage "players to form deeper readings of the games themselves" (p. 48). In fact, Buel (2013) emphasized the power of narratives from genres such as Westerns as players are potentially more aware of ideologies, conventions, narratives, and representations. Thus, players are more sensitive to the messages in these narratives

and may be more likely to experience transportation. Once transported, the theory explains how this "transportation" allows the player to "bring back" beliefs or be influenced by the game.

This personal, transported experience is important to the relationship between narrative engagement and identification. By experiencing something new via the story, transportation may allow an individual to become more amenable to the persuasive effects of a narrative and reinforce identification. Some scholars understand video game identification as similar to Ricouer's (1988) 'narrative identity,' where the playing of a storyline creates interactive "stories" of one's self. Grodal (2003) defined identification as a process of embodiment where external information is received, processed, ordered, contextualized, and made sense of through the "stories" created, stories of possible selves. Other scholars have elaborated on the division between the actual and possible selves. Gee (2003) believed the process to be the interplay between the player's identity, the avatar's identity, and the interaction between the two. Shaw (2013) agreed with Gee's understanding of identification, but the extent to which identification influenced identity management or that interactivity equaled identification were problematic. Klimmt, Hefner, and Vorderer (2009) also recognized issues of self-discrepancy and identification which problematized the process. The latter definitions, recognizing a player, an avatar, including a connection and a relationship between the two, will be used for this study. Narratives have the potential to intensify identification, and for transportation to occur in the video game medium, identification will most likely be involved in the process.

Gameplay and game mechanics can also influence identification through interactivity. Though Shaw (2013) would argue that identification may not occur because of interaction, the ergodic element of video games is the clearest difference between the narratives of books, television, movies and the narratives found in video games. Aarseth defined ergodic as any nontrivial effort "required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 1). This difference must be noted. Juul (2001) argued that narrative and interactivity were at odds in a game, but more sophisticated games attempt to alleviate this tension through more seamless interaction such as freedom to move without exposition, or storyline elements embedded in the gameplay. In fact, King and Krzywinska (2006) and Wolf (2001) argued that the interactivity of video games offered the opportunity for the process of identification to be greater than in traditional media. That is, narrative structures may have carried over from cinema, but the interactivity experienced in video games altered the experience of identification and is the essential difference between video games and cinema (Krzywinska, 2002). Krzywinska's interpretation is taken from Aarseth's *ergodic* definition of interactivity. This definition of interactivity will be used for this study.

This article uses such a broad definition of interactivity (i.e., nontrivial effort to progress during the game experience) as a player's interaction with a game differs significantly. Some players may explore the open setting of a game, not engaging in missions, others may follow the major storylines only, other players may only play multi-player games, and finally, even other players may augment an avatar's dress in order to better reflect the player's emotions and opinions about a character or the game. This definition limits interactivity to actual engaging with the game through game controls and mechanics (i.e., the controller). Most certainly, there are many individuals that would argue for reflection and non-game engagement as game interaction, and the individuals would be justified in their definitions. However, in order to ground the game in video game studies, the focus is on the unique characteristics of the medium and how they relate to interactivity. Walther, Gay, and Hancock (2005) supported such an approach for understanding and analyzing computer mediated communication, and narratives, persuasion, and messages are forms of communication.

Narratives and interactivity are intertwined such that the narrative is embodied in the interactive experience of the player connecting and establishing a relationship with an avatar through choices and actions determined by the player and enacted by the avatar. The extent to which the player identifies, understands, and empathizes with the position of the avatar as actions and outcomes ensue is a strong assessment of the strength of the identification process. However, numerous variables, such as the genre of the game chosen and the inclination of the player to identify or not identify with a character, affect the identification process (Shaw, 2013). Krzywinska (2002) argued that mastering the skill set and game mechanics needed to survive in horror video games, where failure can mean death, could increase identification and immersion in a story. Further, Krzywinska (2002) argued that the gameplay vacillated between doing and not doing, and this structure created a rhythm that can be found in many games. *RDR* created a four-part rhythm by alternating between, free roaming (little to no storyline narrative), gameplay missions (main or side-story narratives), cut-scenes of limited gameplay (primarily main storyline narrative or traveling by proxy, horse drawn carriage or train), and cut-scenes of no control (main storyline narrative). This rhythm and alternating between interactivity and narrative increases the "emotional and affective experiences" which can lead to intensified identification (Krzywinska, 2002, p. 13). Thus, the rhythm, which is evidence of the underlying structure of the game, links interactivity and narrative. Rouse (2001) labeled the connection between interactivity and narrative the "player's story," and he argued that good video games balance between narrative and interactivity. Atkins (2003) and Newman (2004) recognized this narrative creation through gameplay as well. Kerr, Brereton, Kücklich, and Flynn (2004) stressed the importance of performance, especially within video games, and in relation to identity. Turkle (2005), Stone (1995), and Poster (1990) believed these new technologies allowed for unprecedented experimentation, transformation, construction, and maintenance of identity. A number of scholars have considered the impact of race, gender, and sexuality (i.e., markers of identity) on video game experiences (Martey & Consalvo, 2011; Consalvo & Harper, 2009; Aarseth, 2004; Newman 2004; Consalvo, 2003; Cassell and Jenkins, 2000; Martey & Consalvo, 2011). Clearly, video games have the potential to affect a game player's potential for identification and a player's identity. Crawford (2012) agreed: "We live in an increasingly narcissistic and 'performative society' where individuals will draw on media (including video games) as a 'resource' in constructing their social performances, such as informing the way they dress, speak and act" (p. 81). Importantly, a strong player's story is needed in order to create intense identification.

A number of theories have been applied to the interaction between a player, a game, and the game's mechanics, but these theories did not focus on the interaction of narrative, gameplay, game mechanics, and identification. Witmer and Singer (1998), Lombard and Ditton (1997), and Carr (2006) believed immersion or a *sense of presence* to be most applicable to video games. Crawford (2012) also argued for the possible application of immersion along with engagement and flow to video games analysis. Csikszentmihalyi (1988) and Bryce and Rutter (2001) take similar approaches. While all of these theories have their place in video game studies, they do not make the relationship between narrative and interactivity, and their influence on the identification process, central to their theories of the gameplay experience. Furthermore, as Carr (2006) acknowledged, it is hard to measure immersion, engagement, and flow.

Brown and Cairns (2004) studied the difficulty in not only measuring these concepts, especially immersion and engagement, but even defining these terms as they are understood by players, game designers, and academics. To elaborate on the confusion, as Brown and Cairns (2004) recognized, immersion is often described as the degree of involvement in a game. However, presence,

engagement, flow, and transportation are all concepts related to the involvement in a game. Brown and Cairns (2004) determined immersion to be the level of involvement. The researchers went on to document how different levels and concepts must interact in order to achieve immersion: interest, attention, investment, mastery of controls (mechanics), interaction, game construction, flow, empathy, presence, environment, and game atmosphere (relevance of the current gameplay to the outcome of the game character). For Brown and Cairns (2004), narrative is subsumed under game atmosphere, and the researchers do not emphasize the importance of narrative, other than to stress that certain aspects of gameplay may be more likely to encourage immersion in one player while a separate aspect may encourage immersion in another.

Because of the unclear definition of immersion, Yang (2013) argued for a new word, "focalization," that encapsulates the influence of video games on "perception/emotion" and is concerned with the way a player's attention becomes focused on particular aspects of a game (para. 8). Yang's (2013) impetus for focalization developed through problematic conceptions and inarticulate definitions of aforementioned video game concepts used as the theoretical backing for video game research. What underlies Yang's focalization is the question as to how and why a video game affects a player. This article outlines a conceptual explanation for how and why a narrative may affect a player.

Nevertheless, because of the complexity of the video game experience, transportation theory inadequately serves as an explanation of this process, in part due to the difference between transportation and identification. Klimmt, Hefner, and Vorderer (2009) recognized that transportation theory could not solely explain the video game experience. Nor should it. As already mentioned, transportation is not the same as identification. Transportation explains why a player may be receptive to a message embedded in a game narrative by interacting with a story on a deep, cognitive level. In essence, the story is real. The identification process explains how messages embedded in a game narrative are experienced by players as they relate to an avatar, consider themselves in the position of the avatar, and internalize actions, outcomes, and perspectives of the avatar. Identification places the player in the avatar's shoes, if the avatar has feet. When these two related processes are combined, the effects can be powerful.

Overall, this intensified identification process demonstrates the importance of personal relevance in video games. Personal relevance is an important factor in media effects despite the medium. Once personal relevance has been established, then a player can be "affected" by the gameplay experience. Transportation theory supports the potential impact for players engaged and affected by the narrative to "bring back" influences from the game. The interaction between a video game's narrative and interactivity can then intensify the identification process. When the player is in a sensitive state or has been affected by the gameplay experience, then the player may be in a position to appropriate aspects of the experience into his or her schemata used to navigate the real world. Burke's use of terministic screens explains the process by which narrative and semiotic elements, be they themes, persuasive messages, or symbols can be oriented in order to perceive the real world.

Part 2: Terministic Screens and the Physical World

Burke's (1966) terministic screen offers a rhetorical method for analyzing the textual and semiotic elements of video games in consideration of their physical world importance. Burke believed that communication was a form of action (his *dramatism*); therefore, his terministic screen is useful for analyzing how the performative act of video game playing can affect the player.

Burke (1966) conceptualized a terministic screen as a filter or lens that directs the individual's focus

in one direction or another. The screen can be imagined as a language or rhetorical system that reveals an individual's perspective or interpretation of language, symbols, other individuals, or the world. In some cases, a terministic screen is used to understand a particular situation, in other cases the screen creates a worldview.

Terministic screens are especially useful for understanding motives and justifications for rule breaking behavior, especially violence. For example, terministic screens have been used to explain how language games can justify terrorism (Heath & O'Hair, 2008). In video games, the more justified the violence, the more likely the violence will be accepted by the player (Lin, 2010). Narratives play an essential role in justifying violent acts. Schneider (2004) recognized that "by adding a story line, violent acts in the video game are justified" (p. 371). Terministic screens are one way of understanding how violence can be justified through a narrative. Lin (2010) operationalized justification in video games as:

> A character may be considered as morally justified or having justified motivations when the character achieves the goal of saving lives, helping others, and keeping the world safe. On the other hand, a character may be considered as morally unjustified when the character fights or initiates violent interactions out of self-interest or personal gain (p. 533).

This discussion of video game justification implies a sense of identification on the part of the player. For this reason, the process described in this article should be applied to players that are transported or heavily invested in the game, not the casual player (see Shaw, 2013 for elaboration on the importance of this distinction). Through narrative, a process of orientation via the terministic screen, identification (especially justification), action, and possible reaction can occur.

Identification can only work when there is a strong connection between the player and the main character, a connection that is both active and reflexive (Gee, 2003). Gee (2011) labeled this reflective process the "circuit of reflective action" (p. 353). Through this process, the potential exists for players to learn more about themselves and who they could be. This process is similar to Burke's (1969) identification and consubstantiation. One person identifies with another (A and B) because their interests are joined, are believed to be, or are persuaded to believe their interests are joined. The two entities (in the case of video games, the player and the avatar) are separate but joined, and therefore, consubstantial. The consubstantiation is reinforced in video games through the acting, or interactivity of the player and the character, and acting-together is an essential aspect for Burke and consubstantiation.

The terministic screen points the reflective action in a particular direction. This active and reflexive identification, in concert with transportation, can persuade a player to take on the terministic screen of the main character. Because of the active and dramatic nature of video game gameplay, this terministic screen can then be taken outside of the video game world and applied to the physical world, especially when values, beliefs, choices, and actions are justified.

To review, transportation theory is applied to explain the sensitive state a player will most likely undergo in order to be susceptible to the narrative and message found in a video game. Interactivity increases the intensity of the narrative experience and offers the potential for identification with an avatar. Identification may also reinforce the persuasiveness of the narrative message. Burke's terministic screens explain how narrative messages, or even parts of messages, can be used to create a particular worldview. Importantly, terministic screens can be used to justify beliefs, motives, and actions. By reconstructing terministic screens, researchers can add insight into the perspectives of

others. If the terministic screens used by avatars in video game environments are transferable and useful to the physical world of the player, then there is the potential for a player to adopt the avatar's terministic screen.

In *Red Dead Redemption*, the terministic screen is encoded in a primary concern of the Western literary genre: masculinity. Since masculinity is a concept that can be applied to physical world contexts, the terministic screen in *RDR* may be a tempting value system for interpreting real-world phenomena. Through textual analysis of *RDR*'s missions, the process of terministic screen construction and the screen's implications can be elucidated.

Western Genre Masculinity

Masculinity can be considered as socially constructed beliefs, values, and social expectations for interaction and appropriate behavior for men in a specific culture at a given time. Masculinity can extend beyond individual manifestations and into abstract ideals that can influence social hierarchy and institutional practices. The approach taken in this study is that while certain constructions of masculinity may be hegemonic or oppressed, there is not a single and unified version of masculinity, but multiple and contested forms (Connell & Connell, 2005; Connell, 2002; Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985). Masculinity can be relational, dependent on discourse and context (Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005). In *RDR,* the main character's masculinity is plural. The main character, Marston, is pitted against other men, and at times is dominated by other men, but the context and situation shifts throughout the game, and in certain situations, Marston (and player) embody the dominant position (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The masculinity is dependent on the signs, performance, context and behavior available during gameplay. Therefore, an emphasis is placed on the most prominent beliefs, values, and actions available to Marston during gameplay. An analysis of all of the masculinities performed by all of the characters in *RDR* is beyond the scope of this study as is a cross-comparison between different masculine ideals found in the game.

A large portion of the analysis of masculinity in Westerns approaches the main character as trapped in an either-or situation concerning his localized and idiosyncratic masculine ideals. The contradictions and incompatibility of specific ideals' are confronted in these either-or situations. This flawed masculinity is then critiqued.

For example, in Peek's (2003) *The Romance of Confidence*, she wrote, "Discussions of masculinity in the Western regularly characterize it as in a state of crisis, pointing to heroes hamstrung between ideologically opposed models of manhood, one endorsing commitment to community and family, the other advocating freedom from them" (p. 206). Within this model, a "fresh" Western will come along and offer up a new set of opposed ideals to replace the established set. These masculinities often exist in a closed environ specific to that particular Western.

This understanding of Western masculinity is in line with Tompkins (1992) analysis of Westerns. Tompkins argued that the Western was a fictional American setting where men and masculinity was central to the story in reaction to the emergence of women in the real world. Cawelti (1971) held a similar opinion of the reasons for the focus on men and masculinity in Westerns: A fantastical, artificial environment was essential for the experimentation, juxtaposition, and control of the ideals and masculinities on display. The artificial environment of a video game provides the opportunity for reproducing a Western environment and procedurally exploring claims about appropriate masculine values and beliefs about the world.

When not analyzing a specific masculinity from a specific story, the most common analysis is the examination of iconic Western genre masculinities oft-repeated by famous Western genre actors such as Clint Eastwood or Gene Autry (Bingham 1994; Tan, 2001). In broader, book length works, scholars cover the different and/or evolving masculinities of the Western genre such as Mitchell's (1998) *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film.* These books focus on what specific example of masculinity is being created and changing *within* the genre and chosen artifact.

Because of the numerous perspectives on Western genre analysis, especially in relationship to masculinity, this article will expand upon the criticism found in Forter's (2000) *Murdering Masculinities.* Forter examined the masculinity depicted in Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key,* a pulp paperback Detective fiction novel. Forter argued that Hammett's work captured an evolving masculinity evident in the physical world. Hammett depicted an early twentieth century fictional detective that was forced to confront a changing American society representative of a physical America and a physical world actualized American masculinity. He claimed that Hammett believed American men could no longer overpower the world. Instead, Hammett's detectives endured punishment, both physical and mental, and by enduring punishment, the protagonist could exhibit his masculine prowess. This masochistic act revealed how much inherent power a man possessed and *could* potentially exert over the world if he could only figure out how. This version of masculinity is still present in both the Detective and Western genres.

While Forter (2000) focused on the masochistic deviance of Hammett's men and argued that the detective protagonists had found a model of masculinity amenable to the changes of early 20th century American society, the Western genre embraced a similar male protagonist, but this protagonist could not—and still cannot—adapt. For Forter, detectives accepted punishment from the world, and if the detective could survive the punishment, then the detective was justified in any rewards earned as well as a superior position over other men. This masochism inverted the relationship of masculinity and physical strength, and emphasized intelligence and fortitude in a changing, complex, and oftentimes, cruel world.

Mitchell (1996) recognized a similar masochistic trope in Westerns but did not relate the masculinity to American society. Still, there is enough evidence in Western fictions to acknowledge that Westerns were affected and even responded to the ever-changing landscape of American masculinity (Tompkins, 1992; Cawelti, 1971). The importance of Forter's (2000) perspective is his view of genre literature's representation of masculinity as an exploration of potential masculine identity options that are referential to the physical world, masculine options that were potentially valuable if used by American men in American society of the early twentieth century.

The researcher analyzed the masculine characteristics of Marston in *RDR* with this interpretation of genre characterization of masculine identity. True to its genre, *RDR* possesses a male main character struggling with a changing world and contemplating how to act accordingly. Marston faces struggles emblematic of the early 20th century American West and must decide how a man should act in the world and react to it. Interestingly, the challenges of early 20th century America are challenges Americans are still confronting today; therefore, comparisons between early 20th century American society and early 21st American society are easily made. Inevitably, through Marston's worldview, *RDR* is not only able to criticize 20th century American society, but America's current real-world social forces and how they affect and challenge Marston's masculine ideology. The terministic screen found in *RDR* reveals the beliefs, motives, and justifications for Marston's brand of masculinity, and because of the game's temporal relevance, dictates not only how a man should act in both early

20th century American society and present day American society. All a player has to do is choose to embrace Marston's version of masculinity.

Red Dead Redemption Overview

Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar San Diego, 2010) began with John Marston's employment as a government agent assigned to track down members of his former gang since he had access to information and actions most government agents do not. Marston agreed in order to earn the release of his wife and son from government "protection." The game followed Marston from this point until his death. There was an extra mission where Marston's son Jack avenged his father's death, thus bringing the narrative to a conclusion. The game revolves around the actions of Marston as he explores his world, completes his missions, fights for his family's return, and hopes his actions will grant him redemption.

RDR took place in a fictional American West from 1911 until 1914. There were side missions, but to unlock new territories and more tasks, one must engage in the main storyline which progressed chronologically. Marston's actions via the player's choices, affect opportunities, access to resources, and the reactions of computer-controlled characters throughout the game. Furthermore, the player has options to deviate from the storyline and mission altogether and attempt "skills" based challenges such as plant collection and wildlife hunting in order to gain achievements that add to Marston's reputation, unlocks rewards, and allow for the 100% completion of the game.

If *RDR* was played to the end, the player can expect Marston to encounter a vast array of typical Western genre characters, challenges, and landscapes. Because the game's audience expects anywhere from sixty to a hundred hours of gameplay, the game exposes the player to as many Western tropes as possible. Since certain plot choices, settings, and characters can feel conventional or stereotypical, the game relies on the participation of the player in order for successful identification, persuasion, and even the presentation of the rhetorical argument. What follows is a textual analysis of *RDR*'s narrative with the purpose of explicating the abstract concepts that are organized into terministic screens based on the gameplay and mission outcomes. The consequences of the missions reveal a potential masculine construction, a social commentary on social forces present not only in the virtual world but also in the real world, and a narrative message on how to confront these social institutions.

Discussion: Admired Ideals, Vilified Social Forces, Justification, and Absolution

Marston's understanding of what is good and bad is not overly complex. This construction is in line with the either-or situational-structure of Western genre masculinity. Throughout the game, be it during cut-scenes that set up missions or during game play, Marston constantly reminds everyone that his main goal is to rescue his family and that there is nothing more important to him than doing so. The constant repetition of Marston's goal along with the available choices of action explains how a man is supposed to feel about and confront threats to his family (by any means necessary, including violence and murder). Marston's purpose moves the game's plot forward. Therefore, Marston's family is clearly his most important ideal. Reuniting with his family justifies all of his actions, even the most questionable ones, such as murder. He constantly reiterates to anyone that will listen that all he wants to do is rescue his wife and child.

The most admired ideals and vilified social forces underlying John Marston's version of masculinity are categorized below:

Admired Ideals	Vilified Social Forces
Abigail and Jack Marston (Family)	Technology, Corporations, Government
Family Associated Symbols	Social Forces Associated Symbols
Peaceful Living	Death
Atoning for sins	Extortion
Farm or Ranch work	Oppression/Subservience
Agrarian life	Exploitation
Average citizen: working class, peasant, misfit	Elite: landowner, capitalist, government official

Table 1: Admired and Vilified Social Forces in Marston's Masculinity.

More than any other symbol that Marston references, including living a peaceful and simple life, atoning for past sins, or trying to do what is right, his wife and child are his primary concern. All other ideals are subservient to the family, but specifically to *his* family, not the institution of marriage or the socially acceptable concept of family. Therefore, his most important ideal is not an amorphous concept, but an image that can be seen on the screen. This slight nuance intensifies the identification and connection with Marston's construction of masculinity. The player sees the moving images of Marston's ideal: Abigail and Jack. The player not only witnesses cut-scenes of dialogue and action between Marston and his family, but the player can have Marston follow Abigail and Jack around. And, a number of the missions involve John and Jack working together. This distinction lessens the guilt of breaking moral codes and justifying the violent behavior: Pixels are more tangible than abstract concepts.

Opposite this are the game's most vilified concepts. There are three equally powerful dangerous and evil social forces (at least to Marston, his family, and anyone Marston admires): technology, corporations and government. All three carry equal weight, and while their relevance and influence on Marston shifts during the narrative, they all combine to become a formidable obstacle by the game's climax.

RDR begins with Marston forced conscription in order to track down Bill Williamson, his former gang member, not Van der Linde. Marston has less of an issue tracking down Williamson as Williamson has had some sort of past relationship with Marston's wife and does not speak highly of Abigail, thereby justifying Marston's actions since Abigail is sacrosanct.

Marston is much more uncomfortable tracking down Van der Linde. The player is reminded a number of times that Marston was orphaned as a child and joined Van der Linde's gang at the age of seventeen, enthralled with Van der Linde's belief that the West could be shaped by a gang of Robin Hood-ish outlaws. Because Van der Linde opposes the same institutions Marston despises, Van der

Linde ends up becoming a sympathetic villain and martyr.

In the mission, "Great Men are not Always Wise," Marston attempted to apprehend Van der Linde during a meeting with a banker (Rockstar San Diego, 2010). The banker "set-up" Van der Linde (the deception helps to reinforce Van der Linde's position as a sympathetic villain and demonize bankers and banks, i.e. corporations, as deceitful, untrustworthy, and uncaring). But, the meeting did not go as planned, innocents were taken hostage, and the player must protect innocents from being executed. The banker and Edgar Ross (the Bureau chief Marston was forced to work for, i.e. the government) are not concerned with the ways in which their actions endanger and harm innocents, and their disregard for the average reinforces their position as representatives of harmful social forces.

The opposition between Marston's ideals and his despised social forces is officially acknowledged when Marston confronts his former gang leader Dutch Van der Linde during the mission "And The Truth Will Set You Free." Marston's antagonist, Van der Linde, commits suicide, acknowledging that his original idealism had been corrupted by his violent acts and, rather than repent, he decides he cannot adapt to a world he cannot understand. This is particularly upsetting to Marston as he admires Van der Linde as a father figure and has embraced certain aspects of Van der Linde's values and beliefs. In particular, Marston respects the plight of the common person, especially the poor, the peasant, and the Native American. (Van der Linde's new gang is predominantly Native American.)

As the climax reaches its end, Marston is forced to gun down numerous Native Americans as they charge Marston, Ross, and the U.S. Army, using a machine gun and an armored car (technology). The ensuing massacre once again associates the government, bankers, and technology with a negative image (death) as Marston is reluctant to kill the Native Americans. But once again, Marston is thrust in an either-or situation (kill or be killed) by his employers. Even though the Native Americans are sympathetic figures to Marston, Marston has no choice but to kill them as they are preventing Marston from reuniting with his family. Based on order of importance for the main character, the plight of Native Americans is subordinated to Marston's concerns, and since his hand is forced, the Native Americans end up victims to the game's evil social forces.

Marston is not exempt from the evil forces either. Ross ambushes Marston at his farm and kills him since Marston knows too much. There is no redemption for Marston (other than knowing his wife and son escape his fate). However, the player takes over the game as Marston's son, Jack, during the epilogue. The epilogue involves Jack killing Edgar Ross, avenging his father's murder. Marston and the player have endured misery and pain from the larger than life forces of government, corporations, and technology. Once the game is resolved, the player is able to understand Marston's motives and justifications for rejecting the institutions and society that cultivate these evil forces.

Beyond the main narrative and game missions, the build-up to the main storyline and the narrative of the side missions help to construct and understand Marston's masculinity. For a portion of the game, Marston must spend time in Mexico. Once again, Marston is put in an either-or situation where he must either help the Mexican government, or at other times Mexican revolutionaries, in order to track down Bill Williamson. Throughout this portion of the game, Marston is exposed to the brutal treatment of the peasants and poor by the Mexican government, and the poor treatment of women by the Mexican revolutionary leader. These missions only reinforce Marston's opinion of government since he is being extorted by his government.

Throughout the game, there are opportunities to help non-player characters in side-missions. These

side missions do not advance the main storyline, but they allow the player to unlock rewards and increase their achievements, for most importantly, 100% completion of the game. In many of the side-missions, the goal is to assist individuals in their schemes. Unfortunately, in almost every mission, Marston's assistance allows the supporting character to complete his or her scheme and end up harming him or herself, oftentimes dying. A number of the schemes reinforce Marston's opinion of technology, corporations, or government. For example, in the mission "Daedalus and Son," technology is criticized. Marston helps a man build his flying machine (constructed wings) by collecting the parts for the character. Once the character has all of the necessary parts, he attempts to fly with his wings, jumps off the cliff, and falls to his death. Time and again, the side missions reinforced the positions of Marston's ideals and his vilified social forces.

Absolution of Guilt

One added aspect of the narrative that increases the attraction of Marston's masculinity is his absolution of rule breaking behavior. Burke (1973) believed absolution of the rule breaking behavior to be as important as justification of the behavior. Absolution was necessary in order to re-enter society. Absolution is also important for the player. Lin (2010) noted that "brutally violent behaviors, however, may violate the players' moral standard and lead to a sense of guilt" (p. 533). Not only did Lin (2010) recognize a correlation, the researcher found that "the performance of violent and brutal behaviors in the virtual world caused guilt to the players in the real world" (p. 537). There is a high probability that *RDR* players will attempt to absolve this sense of guilt, especially when Marston's acts breach a society's code of morality.

Marston attempts a number of actions in order to rejoin society. With his wife and son, it is through mortification. He asks them for forgiveness over all he has put the family through. However, a wife and a son do not make up larger society. Still, if the player has been persuaded by Marston's worldview that his family is all that matters, then he has been absolved by his family. However, since Marston does exist in a larger society, there are some alternative interpretations of Marston's absolution.

Marston "claims" mortification for his past sins, and he dreams of an opportunity for forgiveness by larger society, but he never receives it. There are two reasons as to why mortification never occurs in *RDR*. First, Marston does not believe he should be forgiven, and so even though he desires such, the likelihood it will happen is limited. In fact, there is never a cut-scene or mission in which Marston asks for society's forgiveness or society extends forgiveness to Marston. Accordingly, all Marston ever asks for is forgiveness for being absent from the ranch, his wife, and his child, not his violent acts. Consequently, forgiveness for the wrongs Marston committed against society may not align with the narrative's logic or Marston's values.

It would be tempting to accept Marston as a victim of society, especially because he is blackmailed. There is one problem with such an analysis: It must be attributed that someone or something else is at fault, but, Marston, by his own admission, is guilty of violent acts and must be punished. Even if the audience is only privileged with his actions during the video game, Marston is guilty of his in-game transgressions, and if his pre-game actions are included in the evaluation, it is very clear that he was never the victim.

The most plausible position from which to view Marston's absolution is to view his actions as transcendent since he sacrifices himself for his family through his death, but both Abigail and Jack are absent throughout *RDR*. The player learns little of Marston's relationship to his family until

the end of the game, after most of his transgressive behavior has already occurred. During the denouement, Marston dies for his family without any overt sacrificial or transcendent signifiers, even though the act implies transcendence. Marston exited from his barn, and the player attempts to shoot as many of his governmental executioners as possible. While Marston justifies the majority of his game-play actions according to his family, his last actions have little in relation to his family; he does not know if they will be safe after he has died. Instead, he drew his gun because he and the player have no other option. It is the failure of a "socially acceptable" version of absolution of guilt that truly reinforces the game's criticism of society. The criticism is encompassed in Marston's masculine worldview: Technology, in this case guns, and the government, the men sent to kill him, are evil. Corporations, while not present at his murder, were indicted during the killing of Van de Linde. Arguably, the attempts at absolution are not for Marston or for players embracing his worldview, but for the player's violent transgressions.

This masculinity-turned-worldview can be considered an ideology. Bogost (2006) argued that video games can present ideologies, and through the appropriate metaphor and frame, the video game experience can reinforce, contest, or expose an ideology, even in commercial games where ideological bias is not a primary concern. In *RDR*, the masculine narrative reinforces a possible masculinity while exposing the social forces that prevent Marston from enjoying his life. Whether or not *RDR* contests the social institutions is less clear especially with the vacillating position Marston takes in the specific mission as allies and enemies change. For one mission, a government is a friend; three missions later, the same government is attempting to kill Marston. Much like other Rockstar games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, contestation would depend on how Marston's masculinity and his world view is appropriated and constructed into a terministic screen by the player (see Bogost, 2006 for ambiguity in the ideology of a Rockstar game). At the very least, Marston's story exposes that danger social forces may pose to the individuals they are supposedly serving. Bogost (2007, 2008) believed video games make claims about the world and players can evaluate the claims. Marston's narrative offers up claims about masculinity, social practices and institutions and how to interact with them.

Implications

Masculinity

A number of influences including the popularity and influence of the "adult" or "psychological" Westerns of the 1950's, French New Wave and Film Noir, the decline in popularity of Hollywood studios in the 1960's and the rise of a new Hollywood auteur interested in film genres, and an increase in the violence and amorality of Westerns, in part as commentary on Vietnam, (see *The Wild Bunch* and Sergio Leone's Dollars Trilogy), created a Revival or "Revision" of the Western genre and narrative formula. In this case, revisionist is an all-encompassing term including correction, revision, deconstruction, exploration, experimentation, with genre forms and tropes. The revision also saw an expression of self-awareness, self-consciousness, and self-reflection not included in the Western genre before (Schatz, 1981).

Instead of the traditional cowboy role, Revisionist Western stories emerged to challenge the genre's tropes, including gender and ethnic roles. For hetero cis-men, the changes in the genre and in society could be found in the changes inherent in the main character. In a Revisionist Western, the main character shifted from the flat, altruistic hero, to a more ambiguous, oftentimes, anti-hero. This shift can be seen in many of Clint Eastwood's movies of the 1970's, but the shift can also be seen in

contemporary Westerns such as *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Dominik, 2007) and *No Country for Old Men* (Coen & Coen, 2007). Marston's masculinity continues in this vein. Marston is not a hero to save society. He does not even want to be part of society. He also does not want to be forgiven or reintroduced into society.

As far as contemporary relevance is concerned, Revisionist Westerns could comment on contemporary society as *The Wild Bunch* did with the Vietnam War. *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego, 2010) was released right after the global financial crisis that began in 2007 and whose effects were still felt in 2010. At the center of the crisis were financial institutions (corporations and banks) conducting sub-prime mortgage loans and credit swaps assisted by and recorded using computer software (technology), and arguably allowed to transpire as a result of lack of government oversight or in collaboration with government regulatory organizations (government), depending on the critic's perspective (Lewis, 2011; Sorkin, 2010; Stiglitz, 2010). Commenting on contemporary issues is not foreign in Revisionist Westerns, and *RDR* is part of this genre. If a player recognizes the parallels between the detrimental social forces in the game world and the real world, then the player may find Marston's terministic screen useful for interacting with these social forces.

By constructing a terministic screen, *RDR* also asks the player to perform within the frame of the terministic screen. If the player is invested in the experience, then through reflexivity, the player may even evaluate and accept the screen as a viable lens for viewing the world. Since the main character is male, the player must experience and evaluate Marston's terministic screen as a potential representation of masculinity. *RDR* justifies a masculinity that "checks out" from an evil world full of external forces that will only exploit and eventually kill a man. Thus, this *checking out* becomes the motive for Marston, and checking out could be as simple as "having a family and finding a little place of one's own," (which is what Marston attempts to do) or it could mean something as fatalistic as running out of a barn and trying to kill as many government officials as possible. Whatever the actual action, the purpose is to cease any engagement with society at large. This is *RDR*'s recommendation for masculinity.

There may be some incredulity surrounding the applicability of *RDR*'s masculinity. How can this form of masculinity exist or be useful in modern day America, or in the world, especially in technologically advanced or socially progressive societies? First, Burke (1966) argued that the terministic screen needs only to be perceived as valid. The screen does not have to be rationally or logically justified. Truman (2009) and Heath and O'Hair (2008) illuminate how terministic screens may be used by terrorists to justify their behaviors, beliefs, and violent actions no matter how realistic, plausible, rational, or logical the perspective may be. The same process applies to players that embrace Marston's masculinity.

As to the specifics of the masculinity, the destructive nature of the masculinity to individuals outside of the small group of loved ones or protected others coincides with the individualistic focus emphasized in Western consumptive and popular culture. Violence, especially vigilante justice, is reinforced and justified in other mediums, and audience members approve of these actions (see Oliver, 2009 for examples concerning justified torture and violence in the television show *24*; see the popularity of current comic book superhero movies for more justifications of vigilante violence). Finally, as for the space or place necessary for avoiding society, the trends in apocalypse prepping and survival products, businesses, media, and supporters demonstrates that if the space and place may not be available, individuals are still attempting to carve out that space and place in the 21st century. To summarize, *RDR* includes enough societal similarities between the challenges facing Marston

and the challenges facing American hetero cis-gen men in the 21st century that a terministic screen can be created; all one has to do is perceive the similarity in the challenges and *RDR's* message's modern day viability and applicability.

It is important to note that checking out is in reaction to amorphous societal forces that are represented by characters and obstacles that can be classified as vilified social forces. However, the game does not order the possible masculinities into hierarchal hegemonic and oppressed masculinities. The power-positions that the characters embody constantly shifts. For example, one can wear a Mexican poncho or a Bureau uniform. These outfits can be worn ironically or as an honest reflection of a player's identification and experience. Likewise, Marston's shooting prestige, accumulation of wealth, and network of safe houses and friends could be viewed as the accumulation of power, or even with such assets, Marston could still be viewed as disenfranchised since he is bereft of his wife and child. The positioning is relative and anchored to the perspective of the player. Moreover, it may switch based upon context. As mentioned previously, one moment Native Americans are viewed as sympathetic characters, and the next, they are obstacles to achieving a goal. The same could be said for the game's overarching message on masculinity. It is not a commentary on a larger, determinate and socially dominant version of masculinity. It is a reaction to shifting, but loosely categorized, forces. Nevertheless, the answer for individual males is always to "check out" when faced with whatever range of negative social forces oppose the male. Furthermore, what "checking out" means is negotiable based upon a range of options. It could be to disengage with society by living in a cabin in the woods, or it could be disengaging by playing a video game. The final interpretation and choice is left up to the individual. This logic is in line with the Western genre, since the issues with the genre's versions of masculinity were individualized and internal. With Westerns, the only dominant, masculine argument is that the conflict is within the male.

Video Games, Identification and Social Contexts

If a player accepts the masculine drama of John Marston, then the experience is similar to that of "highly transported reader" who "found fewer false notes in a story than less transported readers" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701). As Green and Brock (2000) observed, the transported individual possesses more of the "story-consistent beliefs and evaluations" (p. 701). This is necessary for the masculinity found in *RDR*. Transportation makes the video game player more likely to accept and exemplify the traits of a new masculinity. As video games transport the player into an *other* in which acts prompt reflection and meaning-making, then video games can prompt self-reflection, and because of the receptivity engendered through transportation, new meanings, beliefs and values can be formed. Crawford (2012) agrees: "knowledge and video games can be used to inform conversations or social interactions based around other subject matter, and this is particularly aided by the intertextuality and transmedia nature of many games" (p. 81). If a player identifies strongly enough and has a strong enough experience with the *RDR's* narrative and gameplay, then *RDR* can influence the way he or she views the criticized institutions of real-world contexts.

Marston's terministic screen creates a value system that players must confront. This confrontation is intensified through the transported-participatory experience. For *RDR* an alternative masculinity is presented for possible acceptance. In fact, Jansz (2005) argued that this may be the motivation behind why adolescent males play violent video games, to explore and negotiate versions of masculinity. *RDR's* narrative may offer males an experience with a seriously differentiated version of masculinity. Instead of embracing corporations, government, and technology, the player can act out the life of a solitary individual, isolated from everyone except for family members and close

friends, enjoying the few moments where he can hunt, travel on a horse, purchase the few essential items for living in this particular world, and enact violence on people based on an internal justice system. Because the game offers no compromise between the desires of the societal forces and the main character, Marston's version of masculinity may be more attractive than trying to live within the predefined roles of a cruel society. Interestingly, Marston's masculinity is often characterized as the stereotypical cowboy, isolated, alone, and his actions fall into the first-person shooter, violence stereotype. However, like a good Revisionist Western, *RDR* inverts the stereotype in two ways: (1) taking the stereotype to the extreme (Marston does not admire the institution of marriage or the social construction of family, only his marriage and family), and (2) making the obstacles of contemporary social forces and institutions that permeate every aspect of the game much like the physical world versions (the financial crisis was global). Since the societal forces are not only contemporary, but also omnipresent, Marston is pitted against any and all society that is not personal. Finally, the contemporary parallels ground the masculinity and position the terministic screen as a viable physical world option. In fact, Crawford (2012) argues that ideologies and meanings found in video games are significant, that they will be used by players to navigate their real-world, social contexts.

Scholars have argued that video games help players solve physical world problems (Bogost, 2008; Dickey, 2006). *RDR* has the possible masculinity for navigating the societal problems of the early 21st century. Narratives provide meaning and help make sense of the world (Bruner, 1990; Robinson & Hawpe, 1986). *RDR's* masculine narrative provides meaning and makes sense of a world that pits technology, corporations, and government against men and offers a gendered-schema for interacting with these social entities. The question is whether or not the *RDR* experience offers a more attractive version of masculinity than the available options in a player's life, or at the very least, a way of understanding and interacting with corporations, technology and government.

Conclusion

At its simplest level, *RDR* adds to the rich mix of the late-era, Revisionist Western genre. *RDR* also offers an alternative masculinity, one that finds "opting out" more attractive than "living within" a world controlled by societal forces that inflict pain and suffering on the average citizen.

However, *RDR's* medium, that of the video game, adds a number of complications to its successes. First, the game's genre-template and player missions allow for an immersion not available in more traditional media forms. Identification with a video game main character, intensified by transportation and performance, forces the player to confront the rule breaking behavior and the motives for doing so, to interact with the terministic screen created by the narrative, the video game world, and the elements of video game play. This scrutiny of American society and American masculinity calls into question the possible motive behind the game developer's choice to construct a game criticizes the present day institutions that allow Rockstar to exist and make money. Beyond the question of motive, questions remain as to whether Marston's masculinity is a viable masculinity in modern society. More to the point, is checking out from corporations, technology, and government an actual option in the modern world? The answer to that question depends on the perspective of the player and the player's receptivity and perceived usefulness of Marston's masculinity.

As for future research, especially for quantitative research, this framework offers the proof of concept for breaking up narrative, message, character, plot, and setting along with the concepts of transportation, identification, performance and/or interactivity, persuasiveness, and real-world

applicability. These concepts can be used to create operationalized variables that can be used for testing video games effects on players. The concepts can be used to collect data through appropriately constructed questions, which, when combined, create scales for identifying and determining the effects (and the power of the effects) of the concepts on players.

Using *RDR* and Marston as the questions' contents, some examples follow. While the examples pertain to *RDR*, similar questions could be reproduced for other games, and generalized templates and scales could be developed. Instead of Marston, insert "main character," and while it may take more work and gameplay (How many researchers would mind a little gameplay in order to isolate a game's core messages?), the identified message of other video games could replace *RDR's* main messages. Disclaimer: I am not an expert in quantitative, survey question design. Responses could be answered using a Likert Scale (i.e., strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree). Questions could be developed for quantitative research such as:

> 1. "What is your opinion of Marston's belief that the expanding government oversight harms individuals in the world of *Red Dead Redemption*?" Such a question could give insight into the effects of *RDR*'s message on a player.

> 2. For the concept of identification, a Burkean theoretically-supported question could be constructed that asks, "To what extent do you feel your interests and Marston's interests are joined?"

> 3. For transfer of worldview necessary for a terministic screen, a question could ask, "Do you believe Marston's view that expanding government oversight harms individuals applies to your world today?"

> 4. Questions as to the importance of plot, of specific missions, the effect of major happenings (such as Van Der Linde's death) could all be included.

> 5. Interactivity, can also be tested, asking players for their response to acting out Marston's actions (such as shooting Native Americans).

Qualitative questions could add nuance and depth to the understanding, especially of transportation. If a player felt transported, or even immersed, asking players to explain how and why they were immersed, to what extents in the game's narrative, plot, setting, character interaction, could all be questioned and elaborated on through open-ended questions attached to questions of how immersed an individual was with the game. All of these questions, and their answers, can be compared and analyzed with quantitative and statistical processes. Again, qualitative responses can flesh out such responses.

Finally, for larger studies, the data can then be compared with other data concerned with game mechanics, graphic fidelity, game aesthetics, game controls, presence, flow, spatial immersion, etc. Through such studies, the importance of narrative versus other video game characteristics can be compared, and the importance of different characteristics can be discerned for different players. Potential trends may be identified through such studies.

Demographic nuances, such as experienced or novice gamers, ethnicity and gender, violent or non-violent storylines, and the complexities of the messages could all be analyzed through similar questions and scales. The goal of this article is to offer a framework for analyzing what might be occurring when a transported player identifies with a video game narrative and the narrative's effects

on the player. Clearly, this framework is just the beginning of the research possible for video game

narratives, embedded messages, gameplay, player receptivity, and video game applications to real-world social contexts.

Endnotes

1. Almost all game reviews by Tom Bissell are strong examples of the ongoing discussion involving the importance of narratives to the video game experience.

2. No matter how many times the player tries, Marston cannot shoot all of the villains. His death is an event that cannot be avoided which makes the interactivity even more important. This is a "closed" moment in Umberto Eco's (1979) words. Instead, Buel (2013) argued that the inevitability of Marston's death re-sensitizes the player to death which reinforces the importance of the narrative. Buel (2013) also argues that the game design choice highlights the consequences of violence which players must address and consider in their lives. Likewise, Krzywinska (2002) emphasized the importance of moments when players cannot control events for reinforcing meanings and themes in horror video games.

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