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“A Crash of Worlds”: How *Red Dead Redemption II* Creates a World Where Players
Experience Empathy Through Character Performance

Heather Rose Moser

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“A Crash of Worlds”: How *Red Dead Redemption II* Creates a World Where Players Experience Empathy Through Character Performance

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Master of Arts

Players of an open-world video game are more than merely audience members watching a narrative play out—they actively participate and perform in the world. Drawing from scholars like Edmund Husserl, Konstantin Stanislavski, Ossy Wulansari, and PJ Manney, this paper explores principles of performance, phenomenology, and empathy to examine how open-world role-playing games, specifically *Red Dead Redemption II*, help players experience empathy. Constructing this experience through character attachment, length of play, and identification in a safe experimental space, these games become a bridge leading to greater empathy for people who are different from the player. The immersive nature of these games provides a suitable area for studying the effects of this media on a player’s development of empathy for the character they play, others in the game world, and beyond. This paper focuses on this phenomenon through the player’s performance of the main character, Arthur Morgan, and attempts to connect how this experience applies to the real-world building of player empathy.

Keywords: video games, *Red Dead Redemption II*, empathy, performance, phenomenology, ludology, experience, acting, morality

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Introduction

Video games have been a major media outlet for entertainment and storytelling since their conception in the 1970s. Since then, several fields have studied video games on topics ranging from psychological impact, social influence, video game culture, and video game history. Most recent academic research in the media field relating to video games has been primarily concerned with the possible positive or detrimental psychological and social effects of playing video games. These studies often look at either how video games can be educational teaching tools or how violent video games may encourage players to become violent.¹ Focusing on role-playing games with an open-world structure, specifically *Red Dead Redemption II*, this thesis hopes to contribute to the former area by investigating how character attachment, duration of play, and identification in a safe experimental environment cultivates empathy for people who are different from the player. This game accomplishes this by enabling players to interact with a narrative that navigates them through complex situations—allowing them to vicariously experience the main character’s life. Throughout the game, players face various circumstances that force them to make decisions, directly impacting the narrative and characters. The consequences of these decisions will dictate how the player experiences the game. By providing scenarios that facilitate empathy, *Red Dead Redemption II* allows players to experience these effects, letting them choose how they portray the main character Arthur Morgan. The game responds as the player develops the character, either into a dishonorable, hardened outlaw chased down by bounty hunters or a morally conflicted outlaw aware of the heinous deeds of his past.

¹ Craig A. Anderson et al., “Violent Video Game Effects on Aggression, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior in Eastern and Western Countries: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (2010): 151-173, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018251>.

Empathy is a vital skill and aspect of humanity; people have a fundamental need to empathize. This ability to understand and share feelings with a person is essential for social interaction and connections. Antipathy breeds conflict, misconnection, and misunderstanding or disregarding other people and their experiences.² Exercising empathy allows people to see from a different perspective than their own, feel for others, see from another's point of view. The importance of empathy cannot be overstated, and one of the best ways to build it is through storytelling. The telling of stories has been an aspect of human experience from the beginning and continues to be an important aspect of society and culture. Whether it is through reading, watching, or in a conversation between two people, the telling of stories exposes audiences to other experiences from their own, providing them with the opportunity to connect, understand, and feel for someone else. Many may believe video games would foster the opposite environment, cause players to feel less or disconnect from others' feelings. This may be the case for certain types of games lacking a narrative, like many sports, first-person shooter, and battle royale games, where the goals are not focused on character and story, but rather the defeat of other players and accomplishment of technical missions. What this paper focuses on is more of the simulation, role-playing game, where players experience a fully fleshed-out character who faces opposition, differing opinions and options, and the physical and emotional consequences due to their choices in the game world. The experience they have playing the game goes beyond being a fleeting entertainment outlet; it affects them, whether they recognize it or not.

Regardless of how players decide to play the character, several elements contribute to their experience in the game world, which can lead to greater development or encouragement of empathy. One aspect this paper will focus on is how players are performers within the narrative.

² PJ Manney, "Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling Is the Key to Empathy," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 19, no. 1 (2008), <http://jetpress.org/v19/manney.htm>.

Performative aspects of video games are most often related to the technical accomplishments of players—how well they can perform tasks and missions, which can be quantitatively defined.

This paper deals more with the artistic side of performance—how players are actors who perform and embody the character they play, similar to how an actor prepares and performs a role. Acting is a craft where an actor must exercise and utilize empathy to the fullest and be someone else for a time. These open-world video games provide an area where players can step into a role and experience being someone else, exercising their empathy as they play. This thesis explores open-world video game narratives and the role of the character in a player's development of empathy through decision-making processes.

To address the phenomenon of a player developing empathy through gameplay, this paper uses the popular and award-winning video game *Red Dead Redemption II* to examine the ideas presented. This paper is divided into three main sections, building on each other to reveal why and how this experience of empathy growth develops. The first section establishes the phenomenological and ludological fundamental aspects of gameplay relating to open-world narrative games, which play a role in creating an experience where players fulfill their character role and navigate the world of the story. The second section discusses how players are performers, using the principles established by Konstantin Stanislavski to establish connections between the role of an actor and the role of a player, and how this contributes to empathy connections. The final section examines how the phenomenological situation of players as performers leads to the development of empathy, and why video games of this caliber are an important aspect of storytelling that warrants study.

Phenomenology and Ludology

First, it is necessary to establish the core concepts on which this paper intends to build and the areas in which this discussion falls. The philosophies of phenomenology and ludology carry some historical weight and differing opinions on what each discipline studies or should incorporate into its field. This section covers an overview of what these areas tend to focus on and determines which parts are particularly relevant to this paper.

Phenomenology, founded by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, is the philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness.³ It is not so much concerned with reality, but the appearance of it and how individuals derive meaning from their experiences. How and why one experiences reality as one does is subjective. The purpose of phenomenology is to illuminate the specifics of these subjective experiences to identify and investigate how phenomena are perceived by the "actors" in a situation. In the event of an operation, for example, many actors are involved in the situation: the surgeon, nurses, the person who is being operated on, and their loved ones outside waiting for the operation to be successful. Each of these people will have a different perspective and experience of this one event. Phenomenology aims to understand and reach the essence of an individual's lived experience of a phenomenon. This is not only the mere sensory experience but also the wide range of factors that have meaning and influence on one's own experience. The significance of events, the self, others, the flow of time, and objects make up the content of any given experience.⁴ People are psychologically, emotionally, physically, and logically affected by their experiences, especially when the awareness of having lived or "performed" through an experience allows reflection and growth in a person. This is the main

³ David Woodruff Smith, "Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/#Aca>.

⁴ Smith, "Phenomenology."

objective of phenomenology, to enable people to reflect on the world around them and see how it is constituted by them, how they structure reality and act.⁵ When people go through their lives, they inevitably take on different roles, such as the eldest daughter, the loving father, a dedicated friend, a firefighter, a doctor, or even a criminal. These "selves" are embodied and performed in each person's sphere, or what Husserl called the "lifeworld."⁶ This lifeworld is the subjective viewpoint of an individual. How one sees and experiences the world is a unique and personal perspective distinct from others. It is natural to expect everyone to have different lifeworlds depending on their cultural background, past experiences, and so forth, but there are essential aspects of humanity that ground every lifeworld at a universal level, binding humanity and creating a starting point for empathy.⁷ This concept is pertinent to discussing the open-world game *Red Dead Redemption II* by establishing the basis of how players experience playing as Arthur Morgan in his lifeworld; bridging the game world into their lifeworld and influencing the structure of it as they act and live through the game experience.

Ludology has grown from its beginning discussions of games like sports and chess to encapsulate the breadth of video games. It is concerned with the act of playing, the rules and implications of a game, the experience of playing games, including their impact on players, and the social and cultural background of players in connection with these games. Since video games joined the conversation, there have been discussions about whether the study of their narratives warrants a place in ludology or whether it should be classified under the umbrella of narratology.⁸ Video games are unique in providing a space for interaction with a narrative that

⁵ Dagfinn Føllesdal, "The Lebenswelt in Husserl," in *Science and the Lifeworld: Essays on Husserl's 'Crisis of European Sciences,'* ed. David Jalal Hyder and Rheinberger Hans-Jörg (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39.

⁶ Smith, "Phenomenology."

⁷ Føllesdal, "Lebenswelt in Husserl," 41.

⁸ Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (Video)Games and Narrative.," Ludology, 1999, <https://ludology.typepad.com/weblog/articles/ludology.htm>.

differs from other media, such as watching a movie or reading a book. The narrative only progresses through the act of playing and intertwines the character with the players as they make decisions that influence the outcome of situations and their experiences with the game. With this in mind, it becomes necessary to integrate the narrative structure of video games into the ludology discussion. The following sections examine the game mechanics of the open-world video game *Red Dead Redemption II*, the lifeworld concept that correlates with these video games, and how they all contribute to the experience of playing.

Game Mechanics

There are different types of game platforms and certain rules associated with each one that influence how game creators approach their material. For video games with an open-world structure, there are particular rules applied to players and the space they occupy, but out of the numerous types of video games, these are the ones that give players a significant amount of freedom and autonomy within the world and narrative. These games are more interactive as they present a space often based on the real world and react to the player, becoming a simulated reality, though with some contrivance still present. These narrative-based games draw players into the character and story, the journey they embark on, but many games would rather limit precisely where players can go and exactly when plot points are presented to them. Graham Jensen, video gameplay scholar, notes the differences between authors of these games by distinguishing them as a “narrauthor” who essentially has executive power over the paths players can travel and a “simauthor” who is more like a legislator, they make laws by which players have to abide by, but otherwise, everything else is *carte blanche*.⁹ Giving up total narrative control to

⁹ Graham H. Jensen, “Making Sense of Play in Video Games: Ludus, Paidia, and Possibility Spaces,” *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 7, no. 1 (December 16, 2013): 74, <https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6148>.

the players can be a challenge for these simulation game authors, yet, this is what leads to more active players in the story and gameplay, leading to greater immersion and identification with the character and ultimately adding to their performance in the game. Ludologist Gonzalo Frasca further adds to this discussion by noting how these simulation games often allow players to determine their own goals due to there being no particular “winning plot” they must meet to move forward.¹⁰ As such, these games are more like playgrounds where players have the freedom to decide how they go about their objectives and progress through the game.

The narrative of *Red Dead Redemption II* follows the Dutch Van der Linde gang after attempting a large heist in Blackwater, forced to leave behind their loot while fleeing the law. From then on, the objective of the gang is to earn enough money to go to Tahiti, a decision made by Dutch who thinks it would be the best option for them all. Players go about the world as the outlaw Arthur Morgan, the lieutenant and surrogate son of Dutch. This overarching plot of the story is where the rest of the main story events operate. Throughout the experiences Arthur encounters, he naturally goes through a character arc in which he recognizes the guilt and regrets he has for what he has done in the past—many of these events include what players have done with him—and tries to do better, although this varies slightly depending on how players portray him. This all plays into the mechanics of the game world and affects the experience of the player.

Although this is an open-world video game, there are still limitations to where players can go and what story points or objectives they can accomplish at any given time. In the beginning, the game map is clouded over, except for the parts players have visited. As they move around the world, the map reveals more of itself, including little marks and notes Arthur makes of the various animals that players have killed, defining landmarks, and location names. This

¹⁰ Frasca, “Ludology Meets Narratology.”

map shows the topography of the landscape and buildings where players can visit, obtain special objects, or play through side plots. The edges of the map contain high walls of impassable rock to hold players within the defined area of the world. Any coding extending beyond these walls slowly dissipates to nothing, a limbo state, but the area players can explore is a vast expanse that most may never see in its entirety. During most of the game, players are also limited to staying in areas east of Blackwater where Arthur is wanted dead or alive, as shown in red. If players venture into this region, they are targeted by Pinkerton lawmen, all of whom have an incredibly accurate aim and will shoot Arthur down on sight. If players elude these lawmen (they appear on the map as red dots, allowing players to know their location) and survive far enough to get Arthur further west, they are shot and killed instantly when they cross a river just outside Blackwater—as if the game creators are this invisible sniper who strikes down players who venture where they should not be at that point in the narrative. These restrictions are by design, as the idea of a truly limitless game world would be almost impossible to achieve, and the narrative would suffer without this structure. Therefore, the creators must use these tactics to provide players with a more coherent and connected area of play.



FIGURE 1. The game world map.

These mechanics contain players to spaces where they can achieve objectives and play the story points provided. There are always at least one if not two or three points on the map highlighted yellow to indicate places players can take Arthur and further the main story plot. There will also be other dots in white scattered throughout to show side plots or quests players can go on, sometimes only available at certain times of the day. These become available and disappear depending on where players are in the main narrative. Players play as Arthur throughout the six chapters of the game until his unfortunate and inevitable death, where players transition into the two-part epilogue and take on the role of the first *Red Dead Redemption* protagonist, John Marston.

One of the vital mechanics of the game, which is not present in other open-world games but is an essential aspect of *Red Dead Redemption II* and relates to the discussion of this paper, is the implementation of the honor scale. This scale is available for players to see at any moment

with the push of a button. A line appears at the bottom of the screen with a gradient starting from red on the left and progressing to white on the right. A little cowboy figure tracks the current honor status of the player/character; red represents dishonorable behavior, and white is honorable behavior. There are several ways in which players can earn honor or dishonor, and the game will cue when they have committed an action that warrants points to one or the other. A red, skull-faced cowboy with a negative sign and sound represents dishonor, and a white cowboy with a positive sign and sound represents honor.



FIGURE 2. The honor scale.

The honor scale is where differences in narrative and character actions are based, variations occur depending on which side the player is on. The honor system rewards honorable players with discounts at stores (the greatest honor getting fifty percent off), non-player characters (NPCs) like the gang members are nicer to Arthur, and special items become available after a certain honor level. Dishonor brings consequences of raised prices in stores, more hostility from NPCs, but a special ebony grip for a revolver will become available at a certain dishonor level. The honor scale goes further in affecting dialogue and cutscenes players experience; a high honor Arthur will act more selfless and speak kinder, while a low honor Arthur will be more selfish and speak more gruffly to others. There are also various cutscenes of visions or dreams Arthur has throughout the game that depend on the honor scale. A black coyote appears in a lightning storm with low honor and a stag basking in sun rays for high honor; these are symbolic representations of who Arthur has become based on the way the player plays him. The honor and these animals are relevant for the end, as four endings are possible depending on where players land on the honor scale and the decisions they make.

In the end, Arthur discovers that Micah Bell, a member of the gang, is a mole for the Pinkertons, while Dutch is beyond reason and goes too far in his cruelty, forcing Arthur and John to part ways with the gang as it begins to unravel. This culminates in a shootout with Dutch, the Pinkertons, and Arthur and John. The choice is presented to the players to either help John return to his family or grab the loot left in the camp. If dishonorable, whether the player decides to go with John or the loot, Micah kills Arthur, and the visions of the coyote will play. If honorable, Arthur succumbs to his tuberculosis, and the vision of the stag appears. Arthur's "spirit animals" serve as a final reminder to the players that their actions had the power to influence the story. While the basic plot may not have changed by the player's decisions, the message of Arthur's story does. The kind of man Arthur turns out to be is dictated by the player.

From here, the players take on the role of John, where the world and the honor scale continue, although the scale will not affect the dialogue and character personality as it did with Arthur. As John, players can visit Arthur's grave and see the final representation of who their Arthur was in the end, as the resting place will appear differently depending on which side of the honor scale the player's Arthur died. High honor has the area around his tombstone adorned with flowers, and his epitaph reads "Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness," while the low honor grave is without flowers and reads "Blessed Are Those Who Mourn for They Will Be Comforted."¹¹

¹¹ Joseph Metz, "Red Dead Redemption 2: Ways Honor Actually Affects the Story," *TheGamer*, September 4, 2021, <https://www.thegamer.com/red-dead-redemption-2-honor-changes-story/#:~:text=Arthur's%20grave%20can%20be%20visited,mourn%20for%20they%20be%20comforted%22.&text=It%20is%20as%20if%20Arthur,low%20honor.>

The Lifeworld

Husserl's concept of the lifeworld is essentially the natural world from the subjective, first-person point of view of each living person.¹² Each person has a different and unique world they perceive, experience, and communicate from—these worlds are what phenomenology attempts to study, the different subjective perspective experiences of reality.¹³ The personal lifeworld is something that can be communicated intersubjectively or can be accessible to others. As one interacts with another person, their lifeworld is enmeshed with the other's; their worlds collide in a mutual space. Phenomenology philosopher Dagfinn Føllesdal describes that “when we experience a person, we do not experience a physical object, a body, and then infer that a person is there. We experience a full-fledged person; we are encountering somebody who structures the world, experiences it from his or her own perspective.”¹⁴ From here, each subject becomes a part of the other's lifeworld, soon to be a part of past experiences which influence, shape, and mold each person's lifeworld. This intersubjectivity is what allows people to exchange their experiences through stories and where people can learn from others' experiences.

This lifeworld experience is recreated through these open-world video game simulations. With *Red Dead Redemption II*, players are presented with the same world, but ultimately come out with different perspectives and experiences, as there are almost countless possibilities for how players go about the game and experience the events of the world. Husserl notes, “There is one lifeworld in the following sense: There is one world that appears to a person in each of his or her many experiences, and this same world is also the world that is experienced by everybody else, regardless of when and where they might live. Our conceptions of this world may differ,

¹² Føllesdal, “Lebenswelt in Husserl,” 39.

¹³ Føllesdal, “Lebenswelt in Husserl,” 28.

¹⁴ Føllesdal, “Lebenswelt in Husserl,” 30.

and in this sense we all live in different lifeworlds.”¹⁵ He further comments that just because lifeworlds may be different, it does not make them from a completely different world; all lifeworlds are based on the same world, it just appears differently to each person. The world in which *Red Dead Redemption II* players play is the same, but what they create in the world and the experiences they have will be different and distinct to each person because their own personal lifeworld influences and affects their interaction with the game world and the life they build in it. The body and story of Arthur are equally presented to the players to decide how they want to portray him, even to the point of what he wears and looks like. All main story missions and side quests are accessible to players, but how they go about fulfilling these experiences is individualized and contingent on their conscious decisions, including the order in which they navigate the available narrative events. The intersubjectivity between lifeworlds is exercised between players and Arthur as they learn to understand who he is and how he experiences himself and his surroundings.

Enacting as Arthur in this world set in a fictitious 1899 America, players encounter a person whose past experiences are unknown to them at first, but as the player’s lifeworld collides with the lifeworld the game presents, Arthur becomes less of a computer-generated being and more of a full-fledged person. It is easy to disregard others when no one takes the time to understand them, but when there is an aim to understand them, knowing how they move or what they are exposed to is not enough; it is more “important to know how they experience themselves and their surroundings.”¹⁶ Arthur is someone who experiences his world differently from the other characters in the game; he has his own perspective in which players are privileged to play a part and witness. Yet, players do more than simply witness and connect with Arthur’s lifeworld,

¹⁵ Føllesdal, “Lebenswelt in Husserl,” 42.

¹⁶ Føllesdal, “Lebenswelt in Husserl,” 38.

they get to step inside it for the period they play him. This is contrary to when a person meets another person and the two worlds connect, there is not usually a full overlap of the lifeworld boundaries. With Arthur, players push past the lifeworld boundary, stepping inside the life and world of Arthur while bringing along their own lifeworld to create a doubled structure, their experiences and world become entwined with Arthur's. The intersubjectivity between the player and character is as close as possible as both experience the one world together, communicating and perceiving as one. Through interactions, players' perception of characters, of the world, of their own lifeworld, and the natural world, can change. Perception changes through interaction.

The natural world upon which everyone builds their lifeworld remains the same, just as the game world of *Red Dead Redemption II* is equally presented to each player. There may be changes regarding content composition, but each is a member of the same practical world and is similarly presented with its values and goods.¹⁷ This idea, a world that is pre-given to each person, is exactly what an open-world video game markets. Each player becomes a member of the game world and when they save and turn it off, it will always be ready for them to pick right back up when they go back to it. The goods and values are immediately there when the game completely loads itself up. It is through this made world that players learn and grow their experience in the space and continue forward with their objectives. This means as players have different experiences with the world of the game the structure of their lifeworld is influenced. It updates or changes as they have new experiences that correspond to the events and experiences Arthur faces. As Arthur's perspective changes, it consequently affects how players see the game world through him and their own lifeworld perspective. When players experience playing and performing as Arthur in this actualized hyperreality, their lifeworlds are impacted by what they

¹⁷ Føllesdal, "Lebenswelt in Husserl," 39.

see, hear, feel, and learn throughout the gameplay. Lifeworlds are constantly changing over time. As players move through the story missions, their lifeworld and perspective will be influenced and altered as Arthur's lifeworld changes. This goes beyond the world of the game. When players have changes in their lifeworld outside the game, it will affect the decisions they make within the game and how they continue to experience and choose to play their Arthur.

An aspect that differs for the lifeworld of these games that cannot occur for the players is the option to undo certain experiences. If players make a mistake during a mission, they can always restart at a previous save and try again. This feature provides players with control, to an extent, over what experiences they want Arthur to be subject to. They do have to progress through the main narrative plots if they want to see where the story goes, but they can decide if they want Arthur to experience the side plots and events that arise throughout the world. This is a key difference between the lifeworld of the players and the lifeworld of Arthur as they can decide to undo events they do not want Arthur to have to go through. The game is well known for its gore and realistic depiction of violence, but there are even darker aspects of the world players may stumble upon without intention or realization. One situation, which can only be triggered if players explore buildings they have not visited, involves a shack on the outskirts of the city of Saint Denis, where if players engage with the “friendly” man there and go inside his house, they are knocked unconscious and as the scene cuts to a black screen, the sound of a belt unbuckling is heard, and the man calls Arthur his “pet.” This scene implies that Arthur is raped. Arthur then wakes up in a clearing with all his vitals drained. Players have choices they can make in this situation: they can eat some food to bring up their vitals, grab a shotgun, and kill the assailant, they can continue with what they were doing before the incident, or they can load a previous save so it would be as if the event never happened. Many may choose the latter, so

Arthur's lifeworld is not tainted by such an experience, but unfortunately, the lifeworld of the player will still remember the event, even if it never technically happened, and Arthur does not remember it.

The Experience of Play

In ludology, there are two terms referring to different types of play, “paidia” and “ludus.” Paidia is often associated with children’s games where rules are loose in structure and the objective is not clearly defined, the only reason to engage with this type of play is to be “based in the pleasure experimented by the player.”¹⁸ It is further characterized by being free in improvisation, having carefree gaiety, and where fantasy is uncontrolled.¹⁹ On the other side of the spectrum is ludus, play with a system of rules organizing the activity and clear definitions for victory and defeat. Due to the rule system and structure of these games, there are limitations for where and when this play can happen. Games fall on one side or the other or are an amalgamation of the two, using principles from both as an attempt to elicit the most enjoyment for the player. The open-world game of *Red Dead Redemption II* has the ludus rules and structures but also purports to have the paidia fantastical and freewheeling play whereby enjoyment comes from pushing boundaries, experimentation, and creative choice to roam. These loosely based structures affect how players approach the game and narrative. More ludus games provide a closed-circuit sort of product that limits players in their exploration to a certain set of rules defined by the creator, in a similar way to how a reader is limited by the contents of a book, but this is precisely where pleasure in reading stories exists.²⁰ Whereas reading allows for some creative control for readers to utilize their imagination in visualizing characters and scenes, ludus

¹⁸ Frasca, “Ludology Meets Narratology.”

¹⁹ Jensen, “Making Sense of Play,” 70.

²⁰ Jensen, “Making Sense of Play,” 70-71.

games have the visual world already rendered and constrain the creativity to play around. This does not mean these types of games are not enjoyable, but they do limit the immersion that can occur with more paidia games. Being more open-ended than their counterpart, paidia games give more authorial and creative control to the players, handing them the reins to drive the character where they wish. As will be explored later in this paper, players of these games become an actor in the world. The creators may direct the overall story structure of the narrative, but the players are autonomous agents who make active choices for the character.

Overall, in *Red Dead Redemption II* the players have the freedom of choice within the game. The only exceptions are when it would go against established rules and mechanics (e.g., players cannot kill or attack children and cannot have sex) or when their choice must be made a certain way to advance the plot. One such experience is when Arthur is a lackey for Herr Strauss, a moneylender who tasks Arthur with being the debt collector. At one point, players confront Mr. Downes, a farmer and family man, and are forced to beat him up so he “coughs up” the money he owes. What he does cough up becomes the key to the future of the narrative, as he coughs blood on Arthur's face as he is being beaten. This is probably not the first time players have fulfilled Strauss's request to collect money, but it is the first time they have no choice whether or not to beat up the debtor. It is later revealed that Mr. Downes had tuberculosis and ultimately infected Arthur during the beating. This becomes an important plot point as Arthur's tuberculosis advances and the realization that he will soon die leads him to think about his mortality and morality, leading to his determination to do better in his final days. These narrative points must be rigid in their structure for the rest of the story plots to come together, regardless of how players decide to play their Arthur. The game still needs narrative structure, though there are

plenty of allowances for narrative differences to come about depending on how players decide to act in the world.

Husserl states, “the world within which we live is experienced as a world in which certain things and actions have a positive value, others a negative. Our norms and values, too, are subject to change.”²¹ Arthur may have a natural redemptive character arc that players can play alongside as they progress through the story or choose to be more honorable from the start or even remain dishonorable until the end. Regardless of what they decide, positive and negative values are associated with their actions, often followed by appropriate consequences. The experience of seeing the negative red flash and hearing the negative sound associated with a dishonorable action can lead players to regret their decisions and try to counteract the negative points with good deeds. However, the game does not have a general honor goal that players must achieve. There may be objectives, such as ensuring that a wagon is not destroyed when stealing it—which could lead to a failed mission if this criterion is not met—but the only losing scenario in the game is when they are killed. Players “win” if they finish the mission they were tasked with, not necessarily if they are the most honorable. Yet, there are implicit ideologies the game tacitly presents to players through the honor scale. In these moments, when the minus or positive cowboy sign comes up after players commit an act, the game implicitly promotes a certain type of behavior. As Graham Jensen puts it, these are implicit manipulation rules that do not imply a winning scenario but tend to reinforce choices “and can therefore become more explicit if it is repeated in subsequent gaming sessions.”²² If players do not want to be their current version of Arthur or do not like the negative consequences of dishonor, they must do good deeds to counteract the negative points. The game implicitly reinforces the notion that good returns to

²¹ Føllesdal, “Lebenswelt in Husserl,” 33-34.

²² Jensen, “Making Sense of Play,” 73.

those who put good out in the world. Coincidentally, it is often easier to play the game and move around the world if there is not a constant bounty on the player's head. There is still the factor of choice and the goals that players set for themselves to consider: if players have the goal of becoming the most dishonorable Arthur, they can technically achieve these goals or objectives whether the game encourages them or not. There is even the small incentive to get a special ebony grip for a revolver once players get to a certain dishonor level, but they still experience all other consequences that come with it.



FIGURE 3. These are the honor icons that show up when an action gains honor or dishonor points.

As media scholar Henry Jenkins notes, these open-world games are designed to be ethical testing grounds that allow players to navigate the expansive area, make decisions, and experience the consequences of these decisions.²³ Due to the rules and inner workings of the game, players have to work with what is given to them and cannot transcend the programming or norms of the game without going into the code and modifying it. These games are inherently linked to the social and cultural contexts on which the natural world is built; society dictates what people are allowed to do, and violations of the rules result in consequences.²⁴ Nevertheless, the rules do not

²³ Henry Jenkins, "Reality Bytes: Eight Myths About Video Games Debunked," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/myths.html>.

²⁴ Jensen, "Making Sense of Play," 75.

suffocate the experience of players in these worlds, they are what make the game possible. This area, where there are limits and rules but still freedom to move within these parameters, is where pleasure and meaning reside, known as the possibility space.²⁵ Players encounter meaning by exploring these possibility spaces during their play. They encounter and engage with socio-cultural values imbued in the game that are also based upon those existing in the natural world. These playing activities are no different from any other regulated activity governed by social, cultural, and physical boundaries set in real life that constrain what behaviors are allowed. These video games become playgrounds where players may simulate what would happen if they did x, y, or z in any given scenario and the game reacts to their actions, showing the consequences of these actions on the lifeworld they build in the game. Actions have reactions. It is the prerogative of the player to experience and experiment in these possibility spaces.

As players are allowed to play around in these spaces they become immersed in the game, the lifeworld of the character, and the narrative. There are game mechanics that contribute to the fun of a video game, (e.g., the goals to get better at shooting at targets or the successful completion of a mission) but these games go beyond mechanical engagements. The players are entrenched and directly involved with the actions of the character and what happens to him. As Jenkins discusses, “games are perhaps the only medium that allows us to experience guilt over the actions of fictional characters. In a movie, one can always pull back and condemn the character or the artist when they cross certain social boundaries. But in playing a game, we choose what happens to the characters.”²⁶ A player’s choices are wrapped up in the choices of the character. Sometimes a decision is predetermined, but making actively engaged decisions that have such an impact and influence on the game world draws players in more than any other

²⁵ Jensen, “Making Sense of Play,” 76.

²⁶ Jenkins, “Reality Bytes.”

medium. There are several levels of immersion that ludologist Lennart Nacke outlines as the three gradual phases of engagement, engrossment, and total immersion.²⁷ Total immersion is a fleeting experience where players have a complete disconnect with the outside world, but for most of the play, they are prone to be in the engagement or engrossment stages. When players are immersed in the game, there is a sense of presence in the world, in the scene, and in their actions, all of which contribute to a sense of flow—when pressing buttons to make the character act becomes second nature. In addition, Nacke describes the concept of imaginative immersion, which “describes [the] absorption in the narrative of a game or identification with a character, which is understood to be synonymous with feelings of empathy and atmosphere.”²⁸ The players engrossed in the game connect with Arthur and gain his perspective in the world. Their actions through him affect the environment and gameplay, which in turn further strengthens their immersion in the game while they perform.

Players as Performers

When it comes to performance and video games, it is most common to refer to either the voice and motion capture performance of actors who portray the characters or the technical achievements of the players. Nevertheless, there are many aspects in how an actor prepares and performs a role that correlate with the experience of the video game player acting as a character and moving through the fully realized virtual world of a narrative. Although players may not formally train in acting or learn how to fully encompass a role, there are many elements, particularly in the actor training system known as "the method" laid out in Konstantin

²⁷ Lennart Erik Nacke, “Affective Ludology: Scientific Measurement of User Experience in Interactive Entertainment,” (PhD diss., Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2009), 118, ResearchGate.

²⁸ Nacke, “Affective Ludology,” 118.

Stanislavski's book *An Actor Prepares*, that give greater insight into how a player experiences and performs as a character in a video game and becomes an actor.²⁹

Many terms and principles used in theatre regarding the performance of actors can be translated into the conversation about a player's performance of a video game character. In the theater, the action takes place on a stage where the production is referred to as the "play," in which the "players," the actors, perform and portray characters in a narrative. They have various "objectives" in mind as these characters, trying to achieve certain directives that contribute to the overlying "super-objective" the characters have within the story.³⁰ This lexicon is similar to video game discussions. "Players" come to the "stage" of a video game world where mise-en-scene has been prepared for them, enabling them to be engrossed in the particular world where they fashion their character. The actor, the player, is encouraged to dive deep into the character and produce interpretations of who the character is but is still constrained to the direction of the script and set parameters of the world. These players "play" the narrative, causing the character to perform as they will. It is not just a one-sided exchange in which the players are the only ones who act in the world: their choices have reactions. Just as an actor's choices can influence how her acting partner decides to portray his character, these open-world video games involve NPCs who interact with and react to the player's decisions. These interactions are what ground and immerse players in the scene, mimicking reality to engage the player, but it is not an exact replication of reality. Stanislavski makes this clear by stating, "The actor does not live, he plays."³¹ The actor does not actually live as the part, as there are still aspects of artificiality and contrivance in theatre; likewise, the world of the video game is completely created for the player

²⁹ Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, Translated by Reynolds Elizabeth Hapgood (New York: Routledge/Theater Arts Books, 2003).

³⁰ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 271.

³¹ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 22.

to move and play as the actor does. They do not live as Arthur Morgan, but they play him, which has many complications correlating to how an actor approaches a character.

Research for the Role

Before actors can step out on the stage and lay out a soliloquy that enraptures the audience or lead them through the throes of emotional anguish and tragedy befalling the character, they must research and search out the role. The only material usually given to an actor is the script. A film script may have actions providing the actor with more direction for how to portray the character, but a play is mostly dialogue. This leaves a lot of interpretation up to the actor and director to decide how to best interpret the author's work. This material is a general outline providing the foundation for the characters and circumstances surrounding them.³² It is then up to the actors to believe in this life and discover the background of the character. They work to find connections from their own experiences (their lifeworlds as it were) and the experiences of the character to bring feelings, emotions, and breathe life into the person. There are several techniques and exercises an actor can use to accomplish this task, one key element Stanislavski discusses is the idea of the magic "*if*."³³ This concept entails wondering what *if* the character was put in a certain circumstance, how might they react, what would they do *if* this or that were to happen. As Stanislavski puts it, "...*if* acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination."³⁴ In this space of imagination, the actor plays with the character, figures out who they are, and how to perform them—all of which can change as the actor progresses through research. What is not provided by the lines of the script or the director

³² Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 51.

³³ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 46.

³⁴ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 46.

is supplemented by imagination, becoming a part of the actor as she ties more of herself in with the character.

This magic *if* is where players experiment with their character and the world of the game, test out what they can and cannot do, and see what happens as a result. They may wonder what would happen *if* Arthur held up the general store in Valentine? The result could be a small amount of cash, but if they do not make it out of town fast enough or decide to kill the store owner during the robbery, law enforcement will certainly come after Arthur, and if seen, he will be shot at. A bounty will then be on his head in the surrounding area. When players commit acts such as these in towns, the NPCs remember them and comment on how they “better not try anything” or ought to act “more civilly this time” when they return to the place. There are also situations when players are riding in the countryside and hear someone calling for help; *if* they check out the call, they may find a man who was just bit by a poisonous snake. If players do nothing, the man dies. But *if* they decide to help, they can have one of two options: provide a health cure for the man to drink or suck out the venom from the bite and save his life. When players decide to suck out the venom, Arthur comments that he would rather keep it between them and not mention it to anyone. Players earn honor points for saving his life, and when they go to town, the same man waves him down by the gunsmith and thanks him again for saving his life, telling him to pick out a gun from the shop and put it on his tab. Playing with scenarios allows players to see not only how Arthur reacts to situations but also how they react when they are confronted with opposition or ethical actions through him.

When the game presents Arthur for the first time, there is a period of introduction that includes a tutorial disguised as small missions for him to complete so players can learn how to use the controller and button actions. Just like the actor, players are given techniques and tools to

perform. The game also sets the scene by providing a few details of who he is and the circumstances surrounding the gang at the beginning of this "play." The game opens with the gang hiding out in the deep snowy mountains, trying to survive until they can make it to the warmer plains. Players are introduced to Arthur, only knowing he is an outlaw and right-hand man to the leader of the gang, Dutch. At this snowy hideout, players are given small tasks where they learn how to move their character, performing exercises where they learn how to shoot, hunt, fistfight, ride a horse, scavenge, use the weapon/item wheel menu, and open their satchel. These are essential basic actions that players will constantly use throughout the game, but the beginning does not provide much back story of the character or his comrades to give players an emotional connection at this point in the narrative.

This is where there is some divergence between an actor and a player. An actor is given a script and allowed to read and work through it from the start of the story to the end. The actor is privileged with knowing the end from the beginning. The first-time game player, on the other hand, is still party to the perspective of an audience member, discovering and learning information as it presents. In some ways, this allows players to be more sincere in their portrayal of Arthur, as actors sometimes struggle to give an honest reaction and listen to their acting partner when they have memorized every line; knowing what their partner will say and how they will react before it happens can lack a certain spontaneity. Players who have run through the game once and decide to play through it again are then more closely aligned with the actor because they have experienced the narrative all the way through. As a result, they have the opportunity to play with the character more, to make decisions about whether they play him similar to their first time or to diverge and see where that play will take them—just as an actor

who has played Othello once before can choose to interpret the character differently on another night of their performance.

As first-time players of the game progress through the narrative, more details of Arthur's backstory are given, which can contribute to how they decide to portray him. However, the circumstances that constantly arise are dictated by how players perform and portray their Arthur. The narrative material is presented to players with a full path and arc prepared, but they are unaware of which end they will get until they move through the game. Players, unlike theatrical players, are not beholden to a performance specified in the script or by a director; they may not even know what impact their performance will have on the narrative until later, as illustrated by the various endings.³⁵ The narrative has a natural progression of Arthur's character arc, but players may choose to play him as they see fit. One player can recognize traits and motivations of Arthur that differ from the interpretations of another, but each of them still play the character in the way they think suits him.³⁶ After receiving the scenarios presented constantly throughout the story, the players make decisions based on how they think Arthur should or would act as they have come to know him, but they are still dictated by the parameters of the world and the narrative created by the authors—just like a staged play. Stanislavski states, “Then as an active participant in this imaginary life you will no longer see yourself, but only what surrounds you, and to this you will respond inwardly, because you are a real part of it.”³⁷ By playing through the narrative and making decisions in different scenes, the player learns more about the character. The players have done research by playing through the narrative, gaining some of Arthur's backstory, and making the necessary connections between themselves and Arthur to decide how

³⁵ Grant Tavinor, “What's My Motivation? Video Games and Interpretative Performance,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 75, no. 1 (2017): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12334>.

³⁶ Tavinor, “What's My Motivation?,” 31.

³⁷ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 63.

they will play him in the game. Throughout this process, the environment will actively respond to the players and their actions in real-time, just as the decisions of an actor on stage would be met with interaction and reaction from the other actors. The players become part of the narrative because they have taken on Arthur's role and actively pursue what they are impressed with based on the material given to them; they become the character.

Differing Approaches and Emotional Connection to the Character

The idea of an “objective” a character pursues is similar for both the actor and the player. The actor will have an objective by which she tries to work through the character to reach her scene partner to achieve a goal. This internal objective of the actor provides the means to actively participate as the character, be engaged with the actions of the scene and the other characters. The player may have objectives from a gaming standpoint that have other incentives than mere engagement with the character. Arthur may have his overarching objectives in the narrative that he and the player actively pursue, but there are separate side objectives players can achieve, and even personal objectives they create for themselves. These other objectives are not fundamental in moving the plot forward, they are rather a means of winning or acquiring specialized equipment or special items or money, or simply for prestige. A menu list of such special tasks or challenges is available for players to choose from and perform, such as riding from one city to another in less than five minutes. Completion of these objectives unlocks special equipment and often increases the capacity for one of the vital meters. Players can also create their own challenges, separate from those offered by the game, that they try to complete, such as beating the game without killing anyone—a challenge that would be extremely difficult to accomplish. These objectives may not be necessary for the main narrative, but they allow the

players to spend more time with Arthur and personalize their experience with him while roaming the world completing tasks and customizing their relationship with the character.

Stanislavski lays out a path for developing and maintaining a relationship between actor and character, providing actors with the means to discover themselves within the role and create emotional connections that ensure the genuine production of a living character. There are many approaches to how an actor can play a character on stage: some choose more technical methods of presentation that can be impressive in diction and presence, while others strive to be more emotionally grounded to the character and provide naturalness to the performance. Players in the video game decide how they perform Arthur and can alternate between recognizing that they are playing a game and being wholly invested in the character and world, just as actors balance being believable and believing in what they are doing. When players think they are just playing a game, there is a wall of disconnect that makes them less emotionally engaged with the character, although they can still be technically adept and enjoy the act of playing the game. Approaching the character as a living person in a world with real consequences can create an emotional connection between the player and Arthur, as both directly influence his actions and what happens to him. However, the players are also spectators of the circumstances that affect him, dictated by the narrative.

The connection between two persons is not easy to define or describe, as it is often an inner experience that is communicated not only through words, but also through facial expressions, gestures, and innate senses. Part of an actor's job is to study and develop personal connections between people. Learning about and understanding another person in order to portray them is no simple task, as Stanislavski points out, "...it is no easy thing to sense another's inmost being, because people do not often open the doors of their souls and allow

others to see them as they really are.”³⁸ After actors spend time observing and studying human relationships, behaviors, and life through intense powers of observation, it is important they then spend time with the character—listen to the character, feel and understand his innermost being, his soul. The character will speak to her, but the actor must be ready and willing to listen.

This connection is readily available and open for players to make. Contrary to a character experienced in a book or film, a player can spend more time with Arthur outside the main narrative. They get to go hunting and explore the wilderness with him, have the privilege of reading his journal, and sometimes hear him sing or whistle to himself while riding his horse. This is the condition that the actor desires to reach: to observe and experience the character as he is when he is alone when he is his most truthful self. The player is with Arthur day and night, which opens the door to understand him more than any other character in the game. This connection increases as the player customizes his appearance and goes about adventures and missions with him.



FIGURE 4. Example rendition of Arthur.
(The tin star only lasts for a brief moment in one of the chapters.)

³⁸ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 93-94.

Richard Schechner, a theatre scholar, describes a phenomenon with actors in which they recognize that the character is not them, but also not *not* them.³⁹ It is a realm of double negativity, in which actors play to the illusion of the world created by the theatre, act as these characters, but recognize that they are not *actually* the characters. The distinction between what is real and what is fantasy is dissolved in this space for the time being, often referred to as the suspension of disbelief. As Schechner puts it, “While performing, a performer experiences his own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing the others. While performing, he no longer has a ‘me’ but has a ‘not not me...’”⁴⁰ The players of *Red Dead Redemption II* fall into this same realm as they create a player-character experience where they recognize they are not Arthur, but they are also not *not* Arthur. A player's speech often portrays this condition, as she may sometimes refer to something that happens in the story as something that happens to Arthur himself or something that happens to "me." The player may comment that Arthur is not a good swimmer or that Arthur is not feeling well, but then talk about how *she* was shot at by Lemoyne raiders (a rival gang). There can also be a fusion in which she refers to Arthur and her together and says how *we* rescued Jack (John Marston's son) from his kidnappers. The player is not Arthur but is not *not* Arthur while she plays him. This is where a "performance" takes place, in this double negative realm between the performer, the text, the environment, and the audience.⁴¹ Here a special empathy connection is established between the performer, the character, and the audience member, and in this respect, the video game player is all three.

There is a transfer from a spectator to an active participant for both an actor and the player. Stanislavski outlines this scenario: a witness to an insult may feel sympathetic to the

³⁹ Richard Schechner, “Restoration of Behavior,” in *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 97.

⁴⁰ Schechner, “Restoration of Behavior,” 111-112.

⁴¹ Schechner, “Restoration of Behavior,” 113.

feelings of the victim, but as a spectator, they may not feel that any action must be taken on their part. This sympathetic view can turn into empathy, and the actor who once was a spectator puts himself in the place of that person and feels as he feels. “From that point of view, he then sees the occurrence through the eyes of the person...He wants to act, to participate in the situation, to resent the insult, just as though it were a matter of personal honour with him.”⁴² This is what occurs for the player. The player begins as a spectator to the actions of the narrative and sympathizes with the plights of the gang and Arthur, but as she progresses further, this sympathy becomes a direct reflection on herself. The player develops an emotional connection with Arthur, which produces reactions. When rival gangs attack Arthur, it is not just Arthur they are attacking but the player as well who takes personal offense and actively participates in the situation. When misfortune strikes Arthur, especially when it is in direct relation to something the player has caused, the player strongly feels what he goes through and may even feel guilty at the same time for putting him through it. No longer just spectators of the story and character, the player has become an actor who is fully engaging, performing, and empathizing with a living character.

Developing Empathy

Empathy is an essential interpersonal skill that contributes to increasing communication and emotional understanding between people. The ability to understand and share the feelings of another person is important to humanity as a whole. Video game scholars, Ossy Wulansari et al., acknowledge the importance of empathy by saying, “Empathy helps persons to cope with interpersonal conflicts both at home and work. It helps us to understand non-verbal communication and supports us to predict the actions and reactions of other people more accurately. Empathy allows us to become happier and can lead to greater personal and

⁴² Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 189.

professional success.”⁴³ The importance of empathy cannot be stressed enough, especially as there seems to be a deficit in society due to lifestyle changes and a lack of “attention to character or moral development in primary education.”⁴⁴ People need to learn and experience empathy, and one way to develop this skill is through storytelling content such as video games. Reading a book or watching a movie allows viewers and readers to see “what it is like to be in a character’s shoes, but it is the video game that can put us into those shoes.”⁴⁵ Through the embodiment of the character and his experiences, players are able to live vicariously through him which contributes to their understanding of “the other.”

Embodying Character and Experience

Most video games do not trigger as deep a psychological involvement with the character as an open-world narrative game. These games, especially *Red Dead Redemption II*, provide players with a prime space to explore in-depth how someone else might think or feel when they act as the character and make decisions alongside him. As a result, players and characters share an emotional state, as players often connect their own personality with the character to help them understand them. This is due to the immersive nature of the game, which creates stronger emotional bonds and gives players a deeply personal experience with the character.⁴⁶ This concept is often referred to as character attachment, a notion that, as already mentioned, is linked to the ideas that actors render when they inhabit a role. The game invites players to enter the role of the character and experience the game environment and narrative through Arthur, creating a

⁴³ Ossy Dwi Wulansari et al., “Video Games and Their Correlation to Empathy: How to Teach and Experience Empathic Emotion,” (2020), 1-2, ResearchGate, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40274-7_16.

⁴⁴ Wulansari et al., “Video Games and Their Correlation to Empathy,” 1-2.

⁴⁵ Wulansari et al., “Video Games and Their Correlation to Empathy,” 2.

⁴⁶ Wulansari et al., “Video Games and Their Correlation to Empathy,” 3.

tangible connection as players govern a fully actualized person in the game world.⁴⁷ This “melding of minds,” as video game scholars Bowman et al. put it, does not happen spontaneously the first moment players pick up the controller and turn on the game. This is a gradual establishment over time as players get closer to Arthur through their playing—creating and transforming him into their own unique expression of him, which also shapes their experience in the game world. Their active role gives players access to how Arthur thinks and feels when they see how he acts not only with others but also with himself.

When players first take on Arthur's role, they know little about him and are still in the process of understanding and learning the mechanics of playing. It takes time to get through this phase until their actions become instinctual. Once this mechanical connection is made, the emotional and psychological connection to the character can continue to work. Players start to recognize traits in Arthur and begin their connection to him, perhaps recognizing similar traits within themselves. The player may be consciously aware of this identification process, but it often occurs automatically without reflection because it happens during the gameplay when she is preoccupied with fulfilling missions and tasks.⁴⁸ But it is through these moments that character, personality, and emotions are revealed to the player, giving her greater insight into who Arthur is, which gives her the foundation to empathize with him. This is what neuroscientists India Morrison and Tom Ziemke call “user-character empathy.”⁴⁹ The user, or in this case, the player, develops empathy for the character she plays in the game. Arthur's emotions

⁴⁷ Nicholas David Bowman, Daniel Schultheiss, and Christina Schumann, “‘I’m Attached, and I’m a Good Guy/GAL!’: How Character Attachment Influences pro- and Anti-Social Motivations to Play Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15, no. 3 (2012): 170, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2011.0311>.

⁴⁸ Christoph Klimmt et al., “Identification with Video Game Characters as Automatic Shift of Self-Perceptions,” *Media Psychology* 13, no. 4 (2010): 326, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2010.524911>.

⁴⁹ India Morrison and Tom Ziemke, “Empathy with Computer Game Characters: A Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective,” (2005), ResearchGate.

and desires are felt by the player, which can influence her decisions about how she treats him and what she makes him do in the world.

Living Vicariously Through the Character

Players approach a video game as any situation or interaction by bringing their past experiences and perspective lifeworld. Individuals playing games are often inherently driven to adhere to their own sense of morality, especially when needing to make quick and intuitive decisions at any given moment.⁵⁰ This can change and diverge as the game presents players with a world of different virtues or a playable character who may have a different moral compass than them. These game worlds are spaces where players should feel free to explore and experiment with actions in a safe space where the immediate consequences remain in the game. Rewards for making certain decisions can lead to players changing their moral orientation as they achieve goals and incentives set by the game. As mentioned previously, in *Red Dead Redemption II* this is influenced by the honor system, which provides players an audiovisual representation of how their actions reflect upon their Arthur. Due to the connection players have with him, there are actions players can commit that could make them feel guilty for doing so; Arthur is under their charge even to the point where they have to feed him or switch his outfit to warmer clothes in cold weather, so a sense of responsibility is attached to their embodiment of the role. As an outlaw, Arthur tends to be a rather violent person who has and does morally questionable and often violent acts throughout the game. The player soon discovers what is morally right and wrong in the game world, which roughly coincides with the morality of the real world. Killing innocent townspeople, killing horses, stealing wagons, or looting dead bodies of those who are

⁵⁰ Sven Joeckel, Nicholas David Bowman, and Leyla Dogruel, "Gut or Game? the Influence of Moral Intuitions on Decisions in Video Games," *Media Psychology* 15, no. 4 (2012): 464, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2012.727218>.

not enemies will add dishonor points to the track. These actions have a feeling of unjustifiable violence imposed on the victim. Feeling empathetic towards the victim tends to compel the player to stop before committing immoral actions that would lead to greater dishonor for herself and Arthur.⁵¹ However, people may push past these feelings of guilt if they have an objective or goal they feel justifies their actions. If an act of violence is determined justifiable, then the player is less likely to feel guilty for it, even if it involves killing someone. This is especially true if players consider the act justified and do not receive any form of honor notification. For example, there are several occasions when players come across a group of KKK members having a meeting; if they decide to kill them, they will not receive honor or dishonor for their act—it is a neutral action. There may also be times when players use violence to save someone, for which they may be rewarded with positive honor points depending on whom they attack and who the person is they save. There are times when a prisoner coach with two officers drives past the player and the prisoner inside calls for help, pleading her innocence. If the player shoots and kills the officers during the rescue attempt, dishonor is earned on both accounts, but the safe release of the prisoner gives some honor back.

The player is simultaneously an active participant and an audience member of the story. It has been widely studied how audience members of media tend to identify with a character, as video game scholars Christoph Klimmt et al. note, “an audience member imagines him- or herself being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and role as audience member with the identity and role of the character within the text.”⁵² This identification allows the audience to feel the emotions of the protagonist as if from a first-person experience. If this

⁵¹ Tilo Hartmann, Erhan Toz, and Marvin Brandon, “Just a Game? Unjustified Virtual Violence Produces Guilt in Empathetic Players,” *Media Psychology* 13, no. 4 (2010): 357, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2010.524912>.

⁵² Klimmt et al., “Identification with Video Game Characters,” 324-325.

happens when a person reads a novel or watches a movie, it suggests that the act of participating in the story as a character means that video games enhance this identification and emotional response. Part of this response is due to parts of the brain that neuroscientists have studied and refer to as mirror neurons. Morrison and Ziemke explain how these neurons transform visual information from the eyes into the egocentric parts of the brain and activate specific areas as if the person were doing what they perceive.⁵³ Seeing movement made by another body evokes a strong sense of embodiment in the one who observes the performance of the action because mirror neurons recognize body movement and connect it to their own body. This is at the physical level, but also when emotions are perceived, which facilitates identification with these feelings and “[provides] the groundwork for empathy.”⁵⁴

The players feel for Arthur because they step into his shoes, witness first-hand what happens to him, feel his emotions, and react as he does. When Arthur is angry and vengeful after seeing a friend killed in front of him, the players feel the same as if it happened to them because *it is* happening to them as they are Arthur and Arthur is them. They understand why Arthur acts the way he does and the decisions he makes; after all, many of these decisions were made by the players through their performance of him. Near the end of Arthur's story, his horse is shot and killed; this is a moment when it is natural for players to mourn with Arthur because that horse was also theirs. From a logical point of view, it makes no sense why a person feels real sorrowful emotions when they see a virtual character grieving for the loss of a virtual horse, but these characters are not just pixels, they have become real entities, people with emotions that affect the player emotionally. This identification, brought about by the immersion and encouragement of the players to empathize with the character, lays the foundation for awareness and openness so

⁵³ Morrison and Ziemke, “Empathy with Computer Game Characters.”

⁵⁴ Morrison and Ziemke, “Empathy with Computer Game Characters.”

they can identify and recognize similarities with others and promote their empathy outside the game. Understanding how others experience themselves, their environment, and hear their story is what this game promotes and what is lacking in antipathic relationships in the real world. Applying the principles players practice through their embodiment of Arthur to others beyond the game world helps build their empathy.

Empathizing With the Other

Storytelling is a tool that writers and media creators have used to stimulate empathy among consumers to create greater social empathy, which can influence social and cultural change.⁵⁵ Telling stories allows the audience to connect with and understand the characters more, allowing the audience to empathize with the “other.” Mirror neurons aid in this by increasing an individual’s ability to comprehend and understand the behaviors of another person. Empathy is an essential skill and trait for people to connect; without it, people become self-centered and devoid of emotional attachment or care for those around them. Open-world role-playing video games are an optimal area for storytelling and player interaction. They allow players to see through the eyes of another person, feel their feelings, and recognize similarities between them and the character. This is important because storytelling is a safe space for people to confront and connect with the “other,” where it may seem intimidating or less likely to meet in the natural world due to several social, cultural, political, or even geographical limitations. These stories do not require consumers or players to try to live the experiences of others; they provide the means to gain greater understanding and bridge gaps between people who may seem so different at a glance. This is not to say that one only needs to play video games to empathize with a person. It would certainly be more formative to venture into the world and develop one's

⁵⁵ Manney, “Empathy in the Time of Technology.”

lifeworld and experiences by interacting with other people and cultures that are different from their own. However, there are times when this is impossible due to a lack of resources, lack of knowing where to go to have such experiences, or even being limited by the time period. For example, one needn't take a trip to Japan and train in how to be a geisha to understand or empathize with a geisha's experience. Reading or hearing stories from a geisha enables people to appreciate and understand what others go through in a different culture.⁵⁶ Stories provide an area where people can learn more about different lives, build an empathetic foundation, and prepare for when they meet others in real life. Just as learning a language ultimately requires students to test their knowledge by speaking with others in the language, players must interact with others to exercise their empathy for other living people.

These video games are important empathy generators that engage players in often complex situations and difficult questions that have very real applications to the outside world. The more people engage with different story material and regularly place themselves “in the shoes of different characters and experience empathy for them, this recurring behavior cannot but help open up [their] view of the world and create a more empathetic personality.”⁵⁷ Empathy helps to dispel conflicts, for if one comes from a place where one understands the other, they are less inclined to disregard their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Through *Red Dead Redemption II* and Arthur, players are exposed to different opinions and situations that force them to confront what they would do and what the character would do, and to see how their actions would affect the world around them. Some NPCs open up to Arthur, telling him their stories while he and the player listen. When people allow others to tell their stories, talk about their lives, emotions, and perspectives, this act of learning more about a person provokes them to

⁵⁶ Manney, “Empathy in the Time of Technology.”

⁵⁷ Manney, “Empathy in the Time of Technology.”

see others in “a more human light.”⁵⁸ If this is possible with virtual characters, then it is all the more possible in reality with real people. This game teaches players how to listen to others’ stories and encourages them to learn more about other characters to better understand and connect with them. Players are not penalized if they do not engage in conversations not required for the main narrative, but they will experience numerous stories through the main mission plots and side quests, where they are subjected to conversations with several people of various backgrounds, races, and genders—and after that, players can read Arthur's thoughts from his journal to further gain his perspective. This empathetic connection often comes with the hope that if one listens, understands, and feels for the other, the other might do the same for them.⁵⁹ This is the point of empathy, to connect people who may not recognize how much they have in common.

Conclusion

The world of a video game reflects the natural world and presents a perspective that players can navigate through and resembles a lifeworld that is not too far from their own. As players delve deeper into Arthur and the world, their connection between them and the character strengthens as their performance becomes clear and they emotionally empathize with the role. All this is achieved through the narrative created for the player as the power of storytelling unfolds, which helps create empathy. This paper has presented these concepts, supported by credible sources, to establish how role-playing games with an open-world structure, specifically *Red Dead Redemption II*, helps players cultivate empathy for people who are

⁵⁸ Hartmann, “Just a Game?,” 349-350.

⁵⁹ Manney, “Empathy in the Time of Technology.”

different from them through character attachment, duration of play, and identification in a safe experimental environment.

This is not the end of all discussions on this topic; there is much that needs to be researched. There are many more areas of research that need to be considered with open-world games, especially regarding *Red Dead Redemption II*. One such aspect that this paper could not sufficiently incorporate, and where further research would require investigation, is how players' race and gender affect their performance of the character. A Black woman is bound to approach and portray Arthur differently and have a different experience playing the game than a White man. It may also prove interesting to study the online realms of these games with the added element of real-time interaction with other players to see how it changes the narrative and may add or detract from the experience of playing the game. There is a social interaction aspect that needs to be considered and implemented when looking at how playing with other real people changes the experience of the world. The continuation of this paper would also require quantitative data to see how people decide to portray their Arthur: determining if there are more honorable, dishonorable, or middle-ground players, what influences them to act one way or the other, and how this affects their empathy with Arthur and others in the world.

As research further examines the ability of storytelling in video games to promote and teach empathy among players, perhaps the video game industry will take greater care to create stories with elements such as the honor scale and spaces where players are encouraged to explore, experiment, and exercise their creativity and emotional understanding of other people. This may be an ideal medium for dealing with difficult and complex situations, as players can gain a perspective they would not have considered before if they had not seen the world directly from another person's eyes. With these thoughts in mind, it imposes responsibility on game

creators to ensure that the narratives and characters they present to players are thoughtfully and carefully planned out with engaging stories and appropriately encourages players to increase their empathy. The kind of relationship built between the players and the character creates greater understanding between people, leads players to recognize and empathize with others from different backgrounds. Storytelling has taught and enriched this important aspect of humanity for eons. Video games must continue to uphold this mantle by modeling and providing a safe space for players to explore their performance in a world that implicitly teaches honorable and dishonorable actions.

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