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The Frontier as American National Identity Narrative in the *Red Dead Redemption* Games¹

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Abstract

In his work on national identity, Homi K. Bhabha claims that national identity is a narrative resulting from the negotiation between its pedagogical and its performative dimension. The former consists in the stable notion of national identity authorised through discursive practices, while the latter refers to the unstable performance of national identity whose constant slippage undermines its attempt to match the prescription of the pedagogical dimension. The instability of performing national identity leads to a compulsive repetition in hope that slippage might be regulated. Bhabha's postcolonial approach to national identity as narrative can provide us with fresh insight into the cultural working of video games as a form of cultural expression. In this article, I employ Bhabha's method to analyse American national identity in the *Red Dead Redemption* games. Seeing how gameplay is an experience based on repetition, I argue that the *Red Dead Redemption* games function as technologies of American national identity which, in keeping with Manifest Destiny and other late 19th-century and early 20th-century American ideologies, hinges on the successful suppression of racial otherness. The stable identity of the white cis straight abled male playable characters, John Marston and Arthur Morgan, constructed through linear representation functions in a manner similar to Bhabha's pedagogical side of national identity that, in our case, calls for a ludic performance of the said identity. Yet this performance is inherently unstable as the player has to compulsively make use of the complex third-person shooter/role-playing core game mechanics in order to constantly (re)perform the cultural identity of the frontiersman of the protagonists. At the same time, if the performance of frontiersman identity does not meet the conditions of success imposed by the game engine, then the player faces a game over screen and goes back to the most recent checkpoint to repeat the mission or mission section in order to perform a

gameplay that is consonant with the ideological norms of cultural identity of the playable characters.

Keywords: Western, racism, action-adventure video games, colonialism, Homi K. Bhabha

Released in 2010 and 2018, respectively, the two *Red Dead Redemption* titles are open-world video games that take inspiration from Rockstar's spearhead series *Grand Theft Auto* and set their events at the turn of the 19th century in a fictional version of the United States of America. Heavily entrenched in the American Western, the games tackle transmedia themes typical of the American *fin de siècle*, such as the end of the age of the outlaw, the societal effects of industrial capitalism associated with the Gilded Age, the increasing centralisation of power in the hands of the federal government, the first wave of American feminism, and the removal and genocide of Native Americans. In this article, I focus on the link between the condition of the protagonist as an outlaw after the closing of the Frontier and the representation of Native Americans in the context of systematic breaking of treaties and aggressive assimilation policies conducted by the federal government in the 19th century. I argue that, in both games, Native Americans are instrumental to the stabilisation of the cultural identity of the playable character as a frontiersman. Whether under the racist auspices of the traditional western genre, in the case of the first game, or within the generic confines of the revisionist western (Bello; Bird 114; Razzi), the two games discipline the player into compulsively repeating digital violence in order to confirm and reconfirm the protagonist's cultural identity.

In order to prove this, I begin by contextualising the topic of this article within the existing literature on the two games. My next step is to explain the theoretical foundation of my analysis. I draw on postcolonialism, more specifically the work of Homi K. Bhabha, in order to shed light upon the link between performance and identity in colonial contexts and beyond. The postcolonial approach is backed by a theoretical perspective of video game rhetoric that factors in their medium specificity.

Finally, I compare the way in which the two games stage the interaction with Native Americans, showing the opposite approaches of the two games that, nevertheless, engender a similar ideological effect.

The present analysis is a continuation of my previous work on *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Nae; Nae and Nedelea). It does not take into consideration the first game's expansion pack *Undead Nightmare* because it is set in an alternative universe where some of the events of the first game have not occurred. Additionally, the introduction of zombies complicates the representation of American national identity and adequately addressing this issue would exceed the limits of this article.

The Frontier in the *Red Dead Redemption* Games

So far, several studies have highlighted the connection between the *Red Dead Redemption* games and frontier ideologies. Francesca Razzi traces the representation of the West to 19th-century literary sources which are (procedurally) adapted by the game developer. Shifting from the historical literary sources to the release date, Sara Humphreys ("Rejuvenating 'Eternal Inequality'") reads the games in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and argues that they function as an expression of nostalgia for a capitalist system that actually worked. The frontiersman becomes the projection of presentist ideals of masculinity defined by rugged individualism and adaptability in the face of the 19th-century version of capitalism which is industrial capitalism (Humphreys, *Manifest Destiny 2.0*). Soraya Murray goes on to argue that the games are consequently imbued with a sense of loss: the loss of time when life was simpler. On the one hand, the games do criticise capitalism, yet they also depoliticise economic troubles by finding the solution to economic ills not in systemic change, but in the reaffirmation of an American 19th-century ethos that eventually reproduces a social ladder of Americanness which positions the cowboy on top.

Crucial for maintaining these social hierarchies is colonialism, which has a two-folded dimension. First, as Ashlee Bird argues, the very open-world nature of the game coerces players to effectively colonise game space. Second, the colonisation of space also amounts to a civilising

mission aimed at Mexicans in the first game and Native Americans in the second. In the former case, Mexico is represented as a destitute place inhabited by people who cannot govern themselves. When the player arrives in Mexico, they find a country embroiled in a revolution. The missions require the player to interact with both sides of the conflict, and, as it turns out, neither the leaders, nor their acolytes genuinely adhere to any political doctrine; instead, they are selfish megalomaniacs driven by vice (Humphreys, *Manifest Destiny 2.0*). In the latter case, Native Americans function as instruments validating the centrality of the frontiersman. They vacillate between the savage other in the first *Red Dead Redemption* and the noble savage in the second game (Wright, "Rockstar Games"). In both cases, Native Americans are primarily defined by the legitimacy (or lack thereof) to employ violence (see also Nae, "Arthur Morgan as Colonial Savior?"), an issue I shall elaborate on later in this article.

Kathrine Marks takes the ideological critique of the series one step further and observes that *Red Dead Redemption 2* adopts a post-racial perspective on identity by conflating racial otherness with fugitivity. The game presents the ludo-diegetic white supremacy of the game as racial equality by drawing a parallel between the condition of Arthur Morgan, as an outlaw on the run from the authorities after a failed heist, and that of the Native Americans of the Wapiti Reservation, who are constantly relocating because of the federal government's breaking of treaties under the pressure of industrial capitalism.

While all these findings paint a rather comprehensive understanding of the politics of the *Red Dead Redemption* games, the issue of performing national identity, despite a few mentions, has not yet been substantially examined.

Performing National Identity in Video Games

To the present day in American culture, the figure of the frontiersman has embodied the American national ethos. Because its roots can be traced to the Western expansion supported by the ideology of Manifest Destiny,

postcolonialism serves as an adequate tool for unpacking the ideological underpinnings of American national identity.

According to Bhabha, nation is a two-sided concept. First, it is a narrative construct linking facts, myths, fantasies, and ideals into a discourse validated by institutions and institutional practices. Bhabha calls this the pedagogical side of nation which elevates national identity from history and makes it immutable (211). Conversely, there is the performative side of nation which refers to the manner in which individuals internalise and, more importantly, put the pedagogical into practice (212). While the pedagogical side is fixed, the performative side is messy, imperfect, and overall incapable of living up to the expectations of a coherent national identity narrative provided by the pedagogical side. The performative reproduction of the pedagogical constantly engenders its own slippage, which leads to a compulsive repetition of the said performance which results in increasingly intransigent processes of othering (228).

The tension inherent to national identity observed by Bhabha is particularly relevant for the representation of national identity in video games. As Ian Bogost argues, video games are procedural media defined first and foremost by the immaterial rules that buttress representation. These rules can be split into two categories: on the one hand, there are the rules of play that determine what players can and cannot do in a game; on the other hand, there are the winning conditions which have a normative function in the sense that they establish what kind of gameplay is expected of the player (see also Ang). What ensues is a tension between gameplay and the winning conditions that resembles the one between the pedagogical and performative side of the national identity narrative. Not only does the game engine discipline the player into repeating play until the conditions of winning are met, but the winning conditions are also inextricably linked to the enactment of the hegemonic narratives of nationhood present in video games. In other words, the right way to play is determined by ideological understandings of self and other under the aegis of the nation as an imagined community (see also Anderson). Video games constitute an important part of a larger media ecology whose role, among others, is to appease the tension between the pedagogical and the

performative. This also applies to American national identity narratives for which video games often function as loci of national identity ideals where the pedagogical and the performative are blended, or, to put it differently, where the pedagogical becomes performative.

As already mentioned, the pedagogical side of national narratives is supported by various institutions and their practices. Since the late 20th century, video games have been playing an ever-growing role in constructing national identities (Wills) and one reason why this has been the case is the fact that they enable players to interactively (or, to be more precise, ergodically)² construct the pedagogical side that they are expected to live up to outside the game world. By means of the winning conditions, games make sure that the enacted national narrative is consistent with the hegemonic understanding of national identity, and, by means of the core mechanics, video games create the illusion of attainability of the pedagogical through performative procedurality.

Frontiersmen without the Frontier

From the very onset, both *Red Dead Redemption* games are beset by a sense of loss and crisis. The protagonists of both games, John Marston and Arthur Morgan, are two outlaws with no place to run from the authority of the federal government after the closing of the frontier. Fortunately for the two characters, Native Americans still populate the semi-referential³ late 19th- and early 20th-century United States of America. This enables them to procedurally reinforce their white male national identities.

Both games attempt to approach the Native American question in a historically and culturally sensitive manner with different degrees of success. In *Red Dead Redemption*, although Native Americans appear late in the game, the Westward expansion and Manifest Destiny are brought up in the game's first cutscene featuring John Marston traveling by train to New Austin, a fictional state based on Texas. While sitting in the train car, Marston overhears four passengers, two upper-class ladies seated behind him, and a Catholic priest and a young female worshipper in front of him, discuss the benefit of having colonised all the territory from the

East to the West Coast and the role of Christianity in upholding civilisation. The dialogues are as follows:

Lady: Well, I for one am grateful, Mrs. Bush, that they are finally bringing civilization to this savage land.

Mrs. Bush: I could not agree with you more, my dear. My daddy settled this land and I know he'll be looking down on us, pleased at how we helped the natives.

Lady: Yes, they've lost their land, but they've gained access to heaven.

Jenny: But Father, do you mean unless an innocent receives communion, they're destined to go to hell? That hardly seems fair.

Father: What I mean to say, Jenny, is that there is a great deal of difference between an innocent and a savage.

Jenny: I never thought of it that way.

Lady: Yes, they live like animals. But they're happier now.

...

Father: What you must remember, my dear, is that we have been brought here to spread the word. And the word and civilization, they are the same thing. They are the gifts. It is the opportunity we have -- the chance to live among people who are decent and who do not kill each other, and who let you worship in peace.

Jenny: It's so confusing, father. Sometimes, I find it impossible to make the distinction between a loving act and a hateful one. I mean, they often seem to be the same thing.

Father: Yes, Jenny, it is confusing, but you only have to ask me if you need help.

Jenny: Indeed. (Rockstar San Diego)

The dialogues set the moral tone of the gameplay experience. By cutting the camera from the speaking characters to John Marston's judgemental look, the game guides the player's interpretation of the dialogue and cues them to adopt a critical attitude with respect to the content of the dialogues. The cinematic language employed by the game expresses a critique of Manifest Destiny and the civilising mission, as well as the contribution that Christianity, Protestant or Catholic, had to it. Under the guise of an apparently benevolent purpose to bring the light of civilisation and Christianity to Native Americans, the Europeans embarked on a process of settler colonialism that displaced Native-American

communities. According to Robson Bello, this introductory cutscene is a satire of the civilising mission.

The critique of colonialism is further supported by the introduction of the character Harold MacDougal. An anthropologist and professor at Yale University, MacDougal is what by contemporary standards would be called a scientific racist, as his activity revolves around finding empiric proof to support racial hierarchies. Being a weak, psychologically unstable cocaine addict, MacDougal is a satire of 19th-century racist pseudoscience (Elston 148). This becomes most obvious when he interacts with Nastas, a Native American whom John Marston saves from the captivity of the van der Linde gang. During their interactions, MacDougal displays a condescending attitude that does not match the reality of the rapport between the two. While MacDougal exudes scientific gibberish, Nastas is a down-to-earth critic of white settler colonialism, and, during missions, it is Nastas who manages to keep his composure, while MacDougal acts on instinct, thus threatening his life and that of those around him.

The critique of colonialism does not go beyond linear representation⁴ as gameplay amounts to a performance of white masculinity at the expense of Native-American lives. In the third part of the game, the protagonist faces the gang of Native Americans set up by Dutch van der Linde, one of the antagonists of the game. Despite the initial critique, the game engine makes no attempt to restrict the killing of Native Americans who, this late in the game, in order to ensure increased difficulty, attack the playable character in swathes. On the contrary, players have to finish multiple missions that require the killing of all Native Americans before they can reach Dutch.

The procedural representation of John Marston follows the ideological directives of AAA action-adventure games. By means of a series of core mechanics, he is able to perform unnatural feats of masculinity and assert domination and control over otherness much like a one-person army. Yet John Marston is more than just another token of hypermasculinity in a video game genre that has raised this virtual gender identity to hegemonic ranks (see also Nae, *Immersion, Narrative, and Gender Crisis* 35-36). Hypermasculinity in *Red Dead Redemption* is part

and parcel of the American national identity narrative centred on the frontiersman as an embodiment of core American cultural values: freedom, individualism, adaptability, and control over the environment. The fact that, in the third and final part of the game, the player faces Native Americans and the wilderness of the territories inhabited by them implies that Native Americans are the defining other for the frontiersman, and that previous adversaries, i.e. the inhabitants of New Austin (whom the player can easily associate with Texans) and the Mexicans, are a prelude and a preparation for the confrontation with the radical otherness of Native Americans.

Although the playable characters of action-adventure games like *Red Dead Redemption* embody hypermasculinity, they rarely do so from the beginning. The games are indeed balanced in such a way so as to make the overcoming of challenges doable relative to the available ludic resources, but diegetically, the ludic profile of the protagonist is framed not so much as that of a hero, but as that of becoming a hero. It is only after having attained superior weapons, unlocked game features, and explored, i.e. colonised, most of game space, that the protagonist can claim to have become heroically hypermasculine. Applied to the cultural context of *Red Dead Redemption*, it results that Native Americans have the function of finalising John Marston's process of becoming a frontiersman, which testifies to the game's indebtedness to colonialism in North America.

At first glance, the gap between the cutscenes, like the one illustrated earlier, and the gameplay seem to be a case of ludo-narrative dissonance. Yet this dissonance is very well concealed. The cutscenes project morality onto a gameplay that performs a national identity which reiterates colonialism. The nostalgia for the simpler days of yore begotten by the 2008 financial crisis in the US was not without its 2010-presentist articulations. For as much as the frontiersman becomes a model of self-reliance in a society where the economic system has failed, the cultural standards of the 2010s would not have allowed a game replicating the racist rhetoric from more than a century ago to enter its mainstream. As a result, the cutscenes criticising colonialism, the Westward expansion, Manifest Destiny, the removal and genocide of Native Americans, and the

negative environmental consequences thereof morally appease the player and draw attention away from the ludically and diegetically material fact that, as a result of player agency, by the end of *Red Dead Redemption* most Native Americans encountered will have died.

The representation and ludic function of Native Americans in *Red Dead Redemption* proves the potential of video games to merge the pedagogical and performative sides of national narratives. Through its rhetoric, the game manages to assuage one of the major moral contradictions of the frontiersman cultural identity. The game engine coerces the player to perform the frontiersman again and again until the colonial pedagogical demands of domination over otherness are met. All the while, the same game engine reassures the player that colonialism is morally reprehensible.

A similar economy of gameplay and narrative unfolds in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, but this time in a subtler manner. In *Red Dead Redemption*, all Native American non-playable characters with the exception of Nastas lack a diegetic profile and simply function as cannon fodder for the national identity performing playable character.⁵ As I argue at greater length elsewhere (Nae, “Arthur Morgan as Colonial Savior?”), *Red Dead Redemption 2* adopts a more nuanced approach. First, the game features three salient Native-American characters who are important both ludically and diegetically: Rains Fall, the leader of the Wapiti Reservation, Eagle Flies, the son of Rains Fall, and Charles Smith, an associate of Arthur Morgan and John Marston who is biracial: born to an African-American father and a Native-American mother. In addition to this, there are multiple unnamed non-playable characters who populate the Wapiti Reservation. Second, and more important, I would add, is the change of role undergone by the playable character. If John Marston is a perpetrator of the genocide of Native Americans, Arthur Morgan is a saviour tasked with intervening in favour of the Wapiti Reservation against an encroaching federal government serving the interests of industrial capitalism.

These game design choices seem to rework the pedagogical side of the frontiersman since now the core American values of individualism, self-reliance, resilience, adaptability and domination over otherness are

apparently no longer predicated against but in favour of Native Americans. Consequently, the federal government and its army become the main target against whom Arthur Morgan must perform hypermasculinity to meet the standards of the frontiersman. This aligns Morgan, the runaway frontiersman, with Native Americans always on the run due to Washington, D.C.'s constant breaking of treaties at the pressure of industrial capitalism (Marks 163).

Red Dead Redemption 2 does mark a significant shift in terms of how Native Americans are represented and integrated within the interactive storyworld of the game, but, on closer inspection, we can notice the perpetuation of white supremacy. Native Americans fall under the stereotype of the noble savage who cannot help themselves and are in need of a white saviour. In the context of a game where ludic and diegetic agency are most of the times exerted through shooting, Native Americans are largely bereft of access to any means of violence. Unlike most other regions of the game world, the player, too, cannot draw any weapon in the reservation, which makes it impossible to attack Native American non-playable characters. This game design choice can be read as a compensation for the genocidal gameplay of the first instalment, but what it does also represent the Native American community as procedurally inferior to other non-playable characters in the rest of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (see also Bird 119; Wright, "Rockstar Games" 10). Being an open-world video game, *Red Dead Redemption 2* allows players to engage in various interactions with the environment. If the player attacks a non-playable character, then they have to face retaliation from the said character, the community, or the authorities. By disabling the player from attacking Native Americans, the game taps into a presentist ideal of complete harmony between white supporters of the Native-American cause and the Native American themselves. By doing so, it artificially removes any potential contention between groups and ideologically aligns Native-American identity with benevolent, socially progressive white culture.

This representation of Native Americans produces an important twist in the manner in which national identity narratives are reproduced in the game. While in *Red Dead Redemption* gameplay was based on the

compulsive repetition of the pedagogical frontiersman defined by his ability to defeat the savage Native-American other, now living up to the demands of the pedagogical frontiersman *qua* colonial saviour in the Wapiti reservation hinges on an imposed anti-performance. With the deactivation of the core mechanics of violence comes a suspension of the playable character's hypermasculinity which, ironically, is a cornerstone of the frontiersman identity in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Notwithstanding this, the suspension of hypermasculinity must not be overstressed because, as soon as Arthur Morgan leaves the reservation to complete the missions on behalf of the Native Americans, all the core mechanics are once again activated.

The relation between Native Americans and violence as the main way of exerting agency in the game is complicated by Eagle Flies. Eagle Flies and Rains Fall adopt opposing attitudes with respect to combating the federal government. While the elder Rains Fall is in favour of diplomatic solutions (in spite of the untrustworthiness of the federal government), the young Eagle Flies, under the negative influence of Dutch van der Linde, advocates for violent resistance and often engages in violent action against the government and capitalist interests. The job of Arthur Morgan is then to rein in the violent impulses of the young Native American. Sadly, his recklessness leads to his capture and subsequent death, which neither Morgan nor Rain Falls can prevent. The narrative arc of Eagle Flies is a cautionary tale warning against Native Americans using violence and, consequently, being agentive in a game mechanically defined by violence.

In this respect, *Red Dead Redemption 2* dovetails with *Red Dead Redemption*, which also assumes that Native American ludic agency can only be detrimental and illegitimate. In the first game, all Native Americans with the exception of Nastas are defined by their ludic ability to harm the playable character, which automatically defines them as necessary targets for John Marston. In the second game, the existence of Native Americans is not challenged if they remain passive. However, as soon as they take up arms, they have to die.

The Weaker Race? Dutch van der Linde, Transcendentalism, and Native Americans

Both *Red Dead Redemption* games find that ludic agency in the form of violence exerted by Native Americans is not legitimate. In the first game, this justifies their killing by John Marston, while in the second the few who do take up arms die at the hands of the federal government. One element binding together Native American violence in both games is the presence of Dutch van der Linde, who seems to affect a negative influence on Native Americans by alienating them from their ludic passivity.

To better understand van der Linde's role in relation to Native Americans, a brief plot outline of the two games is necessary. Van der Linde's story commences in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, which is set in 1899. The game begins with the van der Linde gang, which includes Arthur Morgan and John Marston, running away from the authorities after a failed heist. In the early cutscenes of the game, van der Linde comes off as a caring leader, who is genuinely concerned with the well-being of those he leads. Desperate to overcome their condition as runaways, van der Linde makes several attempts to earn or steal enough money to ensure the safety of the gang. As these attempts fail, van der Linde becomes increasingly suspicious of the loyalty of his gang members and strays from the philosophy that initially guided his actions. As William Liam Harrington points out, Dutch's downfall is co-extensive with the gang's movement eastwards while running away from the law (3). He considers himself an American Robin Hood who steals from the corrupt rich of the Gilded Age and gives to the poor, and who is guided by the Transcendentalist thought of the in-game character Evelyn Miller, an embodiment of Henry David Thoreau.

Thoreau sees the 19th-century brand of modernity marked by the expansion of industrial capitalism and wage labour as the shackles of one's consciousness. By removing oneself from the urban space beset by the machinery of capitalism, one could live a simpler life that would allow one to overcome the obsession with material gain and devote one's time and attention to immaterial values such the knowledge, beauty, and ethics that only nature can teach (Thoreau, *Walden*). Thoreau's idea of being in

harmony with nature was important for his critique of government. Because it was not ethically guided by nature, the government was bound to engage in immoral acts. Consequently, he maintained that the government should be disobeyed if its acts did not meet the individual's ethical standards that nature had taught him⁶ ("Resistance to Civil Government"). Taking this into account, it should come as no surprise that Thoreau was appreciative of Native Americans due to their strong bond with nature.⁷ In "The Natural History of Massachusetts," he claims that

It is with science as with ethics, – we cannot know truth by contrivance and method; the Baconian is as false as any other, and with all the helps of machinery and the arts, the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom (26).

The downfall of Dutch van der Linde, as a leader inspired by Thoreau in the form of Evelyn Miller in the game world, is marked by him eventually succumbing to the principles of the very society he rejects: selfishness, materialism, and disregard for Native Americans. This becomes obvious when, out of his interest to obtain valuable state bonds hidden in a distillery in the Heartland Oil Fields, van der Linde encourages Eagle Flies to attack the distillery as retaliation against the federal army and corporate interest. Eagle Flies and his group are easily beaten by the army, but van der Linde manages to take the state bonds and leaves the premises without any concern for the wounded left behind. After betraying several other members, van der Linde eventually loses the trust of his fellow gang, which leads to a final confrontation between Arthur Morgan and John Marston, on the one hand, and Dutch van der Linde and the rest of loyal gang members, on the other. The confrontation ends with Morgan's death, upon which the player assumes control of John Marston. The next events occur in 1907, when Marston tracks down van der Linde but is unable to kill him. From that point onward, van der Linde is gone missing, but makes his reappearance in *Red Dead Redemption*. Set in 1911, the game tasks the player with assuming control of John Marston who, blackmailed by the government, has to find and kill Dutch van der Linde who has returned to his criminal activities. As it turns out, he has

again manipulated disenfranchised Native Americans to join his reactionary cause. Before dying at the end, van der Linde deplores the end of the frontiersman who has been caught up by modernity.

After playing the first game, it is difficult to assess to what extent van der Linde's anti-modern discourse is genuine or simply a ruse used to talk disenfranchised people into helping him accomplish his selfish anarchist goals. The second game disambiguates Dutch's motives and highlights the disingenuity of his idealism.

Taking this into account, we can compare the way in which Native Americans and characters of other ethnicity/race relate to van der Linde's rhetoric. We notice that, while white characters eventually see through his deception and stop backing him (with the exception of those who share his ruthlessness and materialism), Native Americans are helpless victims of his persuasiveness. Once there is no one else to fool, van der Linde can always rely either on the Native Americans of the Wapiti Reservation in *Red Dead Redemption 2* or on those of the Tall Trees region in *Red Dead Redemption* for gullible recruits. What the two games imply is that, intellectually, Native Americans are "the weaker race," to use an expression prevalent at the time when the games are set. Unlike the perceptive white frontiersmen, they do not seem to be able to perceive Dutch van der Linde's hypocrisy.

Conclusion

As an ergodic medium, video games are ideal for reproducing hegemonic national identity narratives. As Bhabha argues, nationality is an identity narrative characterised by a tension between its pedagogical and its performative side. By means of core mechanics and winning conditions, video games bring the performative into the pedagogical and make the abstract traits of national identity seem attainable. Published in periods of significant social upheaval in the US (the immediate post-2008 financial crisis years and Donald Trump's first presidency), the two *Red Dead Redemption* games express nostalgia for a historical period of the country that was more hospitable to the articulation and embodiment of core American values associated with life on the frontier: individualism, self-

reliance, adaptability, and domination over the environment. The game engines of both games set winning conditions that are in keeping with the pedagogical frontiers and empower the players with the game mechanics to successfully perform the pedagogical.

The performance of the frontiersman identity hinges on the relation that the playable characters of the two games have with Native Americans. Under the diegetic guise of the protagonist's struggle to be reunited with his family, John Marston performs the frontiersman by killing off most, if not all, the Native Americans that he encounters. In the game world, Native Americans do not exist in and of themselves, but rather only as instruments for the protagonist's performance of national identity. In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the protagonist turns from colonial perpetrator into colonial saviour as now Native Americans depend on Arthur Morgan's agency in their struggle to keep their land against an encroaching federal government. Now, white supremacy is reinforced by rendering Native Americans inevitable victims to white violence, which is why in the Wapiti Reservation Arthur Morgan may not use any weapons. When Native Americans are indeed agentive, their endeavours end in tragedy, hence the game functioning as a cautionary tale against acting outside the ambit of white authority. Finally, both games represent Native Americans as intellectually inferior to white characters since they are the only ones who Dutch van der Linde can still manipulate after showing his true face in the events of *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

Overall, the *Red Dead Redemption*, franchise perpetuates an understanding of Native Americans as inferior, worthy either of murder or salvation, but never of agency, which reiterates the white hegemonic discourse that has plagued American national identity since its inception.

Notes:

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² Espen Aarseth uses the term ergodic to designate those media whose interactivity enables users to contribute to the material signs of the medium, thus resulting not in a linear representation, but in a non-linear one, or, as Marie-Laure Ryan would call it, a simulation (13).

³ For an overview of historical referentiality in the *Red Dead Redemption 2*, see Ian Donald and Andrew Reid's "The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*." For a deconstruction of historical authenticity in the *Red Dead Redemption* games, see Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History. Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity*.

⁴ I am referring to the means of representation specific to traditional media, i.e. text, film, etc., that the games incorporate.

⁵ Arguably, even Nastas's diegetic profile is very schematic in comparison to other characters (Elson 149).

⁶ I am using the masculine pronoun in accordance with the patriarchal overtones of Thoreau's work.

⁷ We are, of course, dealing with a reiteration of the Romantic noble savage trope.

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