

Video Games as Literature?
Realist Discourse in *Red Dead Redemption 2*

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Abstract

The present essay wishes to explore the link between video games and literary discourse by considering the case of Rockstar Games’s *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), the worldwide blockbuster game regarded as a milestone in the Western genre, as well as a contemporary reframing of the nineteenth-century mythology of the American frontier. However, as a theoretical focus on narrativity and storytelling may suggest, *Red Dead Redemption 2* also represents a specimen of narrative work in its own right. In fact, *Red Dead Redemption 2* indirectly adapts literary techniques and tropes typical of realist fiction, in its complex and subtle portrayal of late-nineteenth-century American society.

By means of a close reading of key video game missions set in what can be defined as a typical Gilded Age metropolis, Saint Denis, this essay proposes to reinterpret *Red Dead Redemption 2* in light of the structural connections it shares with classic American realist works – whose authors range from Mark Twain to Henry James, from Stephen Crane to Theodore Dreiser. Indeed, *Red Dead Redemption 2* mirrors three pivotal stages in the development of the literary discourse underlying realist fiction, namely: (a) the examination of an urban environment within the game setting; (b) the representation of stereotypes through non-player characters; and (c) the construction of a socio-cultural individuality through player actions. While representing a case-study of transmedia storytelling – or, more precisely, of *storyplaying* of the American lifestyle characterizing the Gilded Age, *Red Dead Redemption 2* also employs a number of significant strategies comparable to the creation of literary fiction.

Keywords: American literature, American literary realism, realist fiction, nineteenth-century literature, Gilded Age, transmedia storytelling, *Red Dead Redemption*

“He knew enough about that city
to know that its mysteries,
and possibilities of mystification, were infinite.” (296)
– Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

“Now remember what I said . . . ,
everyone is the author of his own good fortune.”
– Josiah Trelawny in *Red Dead Redemption 2*

Worlds of Fiction: Video Game Narrative and Realist Discourse

Current critical and scholarly perspectives on video gaming often challenge the common assumption that games might be a mere product of the entertainment industry. A number of these perspectives underline the intrinsic literary quality of video games: the most recent trends in this direction include what scholars Eric Hayot and Gundolf Freyermuth, among others, have seen as a basic connection between video games and literature. This critical trend argues that both games and literature are grounded on a type of storytelling that implies a certain degree of interaction, so that video games share with novels some basic aspects of narrativity and diegetic discourse (Hayot). While the origins of digital games can be traced back to twentieth-century experimental fiction in terms of storytelling and user (i.e. reader/player) experience, contemporary video games often show both direct and indirect forms of transmedia exchange – these forms involving the adaptation of specific literary works, as well as wider and subtler interrelations through genres, styles, and techniques (Freyermuth). For instance, video games may even be considered a peculiar subgenre of transnational literature, if understood as digital environments highly characterized by phenomena of hybridization, cross-culturalism, and internationalism (Melnic and Melnic).

Just like many literary narrative forms do, video games perform the development of a story, which relies upon traditional structural elements such as the sequence of rising actions leading to the climax (and eventual resolution) of the story itself. In this regard, storytelling and game content writing share a common ground based on narrative design,

which is defined by Ross Berger as the process of “creating a pathway for story, to be revealed one bit at a time, once conditions have been met, within or in between gameplay moments” (11). What’s more, specific narrative mechanisms in the gameplay, like cutscenes or dialogues, also help shape this narrative construction, while being intertwined with the players’ active experience (Berger 11-13). This kind of engagement is expressed by way of the influence the very players may exert through making choices – or their simple feeling about that – on the evolution of the game narrative (McGill). Hence, this crucial convergence between storytelling and player interaction has been defined as storyplaying, because it involves the dimension of agency within the very narrative construction (Domsch).

Against this background, this essay attempts to demonstrate how the Western video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (developed and published by Rockstar Games in 2018) can be read as a specimen of literary work in its own right, by focusing on a discussion about the techniques of narrative construction that are typical of literary works of fiction. More specifically, and with close reference to the historical Gilded Age setting characterizing the video game, the narrative construction in *Red Dead Redemption 2* can be compared to the artistic discourse marking the heyday of American literary realism at the end of the nineteenth century. In other words, by interactively reproducing the devices of the aesthetic discourse shaping realist fiction, *Red Dead Redemption 2* may stand as a favorable example of transmedia literary realist work.

Scholars such as Donald Pizer and Keith Newlin have highlighted the difficulties inherent in finding a univocal definition of realism in American literary history. According to Pizer, despite the different philosophical, moral, and social implications of the term “realism,” the term itself “can be used to historical and critical advantage to designate a body of writing produced during a distinctive phase of American expression” (5) – that is, a phase of American cultural life whose beginnings can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. As Newlin argues, under the rubric of “realism” falls “an elastic movement” (5) that encompasses different levels of critical analysis, namely: the relation with other literary movements and features, the conditions and limits of literary

representation, as well as the ways in which realistic works might be read (5). Then, for the purposes of the present study, a critical focus on the aesthetic creation of the contents characterizing realist fiction will prove particularly helpful. Classic definitions of literary realism often address the importance of the authors' perspective and their intellectual authority in construing what can be read as a *real* story, a story whose social credit proves thus undisputed (see Bell; Barrish). However, rather than a critical interpretation centered on the authorial stances laying beneath the surface of realist works, a content-oriented reading proves more fruitful in highlighting the literary creation of a realist discourse within late-nineteenth-century works of fiction. This kind of content-oriented realist discourse is based on a narrative process that may involve three consecutive strategies: in this sense, a realist literary discourse may be designed in order to originate from the *examination*, then stretch to the *representation*, and end with the *construction* of a social world. In the first instance, realist works entail what George Becker has called "an examination of social situations and processes" (26-27). Then, as Nancy Glazener has pointed out, realism is a matter that has "to be read for" by "valuing texts about American contemporary life and construing their representations as 'typical' rather than 'idealizing'" (14). The focus on Glazener's idea of representation leads to consider the third and last strategy characterizing the realist discourse – that is, the literary making up of a social realm. Amy Kaplan has underlined how realist writers "explore . . . their implication in constructing the reality their novels represent," according to a narrative process that produces "a social world out of the raw materials of unreality, conflict, and change" (14). These three strategies of realist discourse – examination, representation, and construction – build the socio-cultural environment narrated in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and likewise reflected in the fictional works of late-nineteenth-century American realism, such as Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-day* (1873), Henry James's "The Real Thing" (1892), Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). Thus, the following sections will show how the three modes of realist discourse can be applied to the narrative construction of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. In

order to explore the interactive side of the three stages of realist discourse in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, different features of storyplaying will be addressed – respectively, the exposition of the game setting, the depiction of non-player characters, and the role of player actions (see Domsch 32-46). Accordingly, the game setting is focused on a founding depiction of the Gilded Age cultural and urban milieu, while both non-player and player characters will be read as expressive of some key issues connected to the late-nineteenth-century lifestyle – that is, the political, socio-economic, and artistic experiences marking the growth of a modern individuality. Furthermore, in terms of gaming performance, the whole narrative design leads the player from a lower to a higher level of involvement within the story. In other words, the three strategies of realist discourse reflect a simultaneous and progressive process of player participation; this process starts from the surface of the game setting and gradually deepens through the interactions among non-player and player characters.

Examinations of the American Gilded Age: Game Setting

The treatment of history represents a thriving topic for a critical discussion on video game storytelling (Whalen and Taylor; Kapell and Elliott). With regard to the narrative design of a history-based game, then, *Red Dead Redemption 2* is a case in point. The game is an open-world adventure set in 1899, at a time when a gang of outlaws tries to survive the end of the epic age of the frontier. In terms of storyplaying, the head of this gang, Dutch Van der Linde, is a non-player character, while player characters are the gang members (and game protagonists) Arthur Morgan (Chapters 1 to 6) and John Marston (Epilogue Parts 1 and 2). While the members of the Van der Linde gang fight against their main opponent, the railroad baron Leviticus Cornwall and his acolytes, they experience countless adventures both in and out of the frontier; these adventures take place across varying locations that are visually and culturally representative of the open spaces of the American wilderness and of the urban realities of small towns and huge metropolises. As such, *Red Dead Redemption 2* offers a thorough depiction (and revision) of the Western

genre and its socio-cultural tropes, as a multi-layered form of transmedia narrative (see Wills and Wright). At the same time, from the viewpoint of interactive storytelling, this analysis will highlight how its gameplay as well as player and non-player characters remarkably add to the historical and cultural references to the spaces inside the game. Thus, as a version of storyplaying, *Red Dead Redemption 2* may be read as a re-telling of American history that is centered on video game characters representative of the modern individual at the turn of the century, as the following sections will show in detail. In this instance, if broadly considered through the conflicting spaces of the frontier and the metropolis, *Red Dead Redemption 2* emerges as a narrative of the transition from the “old world of cowboys” to the modern United States – that is, as a narrative of the modern space ‘in the making’ of American society during the Gilded Age. In terms of literary realism, this kind of narrative in *Red Dead Redemption 2* is grounded in the process of *examination* of the social environment characterizing the game storyline – an examination that takes place interactively and in relation to storyplaying through the device of exposition of the video game setting. Most importantly, in terms of narrative design, this joint process of examination and exposition must be considered as an introductory stage to the game setting in which the player will be gradually involved.

Historically, the construction of the modern space at the turn of the twentieth century defines the American urban experience across the whole nation, and it stretches from the Northeast and Midwest to the cities in the West and South. Along with the often-cited matters concerning race, ethnicity, and class divisions within the urban environment, as well as more nuanced issues related to the religious experience and gender roles (Edwards), the late-nineteenth-century American city features a material, economic progress, thanks to the rise of new entrepreneurs in business and industry (see Cashman). Developments in this trend involve the rise of new professions and institutions (such as public health, paving, lighting, education, and charity organizations), business corporations (dealing with trolley transportation, newspapers and magazines, or department stores), and forms of entertainment (like dance halls, vaudeville theaters, movies, and amusement parks) (Kahan). From a socio-cultural standpoint, this

kind of new city is also connoted by a set of ideas related to physical danger, crime, and corruption – in other words, a menacing and mysterious place of “unfathomable darkness and shadow” (Trachtenberg 103). Widely known as the Gilded Age, this era shows a world whose contradictions are famously chronicled by Twain and Warner in their eponymous novel. In the “Preface” to *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-day*, Twain and Warner ironically claim that their work, to the extent of its fictional, imaginative quality, lacks profitable examples of good-natured citizenship because:

In a state where there is no fever of speculation, no inflamed desire for sudden wealth, where the poor are all simple-minded and contented, and the rich are all honest and generous, where society is in a condition of primitive purity, and politics is the occupation of only the capable and the patriotic there are necessarily no materials for such a history as we have constructed out of an ideal commonwealth. (v-vi)

Deeply rooted into its authors’ biographical experiences and historical sources (French), above all *The Gilded Age* is an outstanding example of Twain and Warner’s ironic commentary on American social life; indeed, as Louis Budd argues, Twain’s major works are thoroughly characterized by a ‘philosophical’ attitude on current socio-political affairs. In *The Gilded Age*, the main targets of Twain and Warner’s satire are the political corruption and financial speculation menacing the traditional values of domesticity (Krauth), along with the rising character type of the American entrepreneur as representative of this new political and economic order; Twain keenly “recognized the manipulative skill of big-businessmanship – the new art of the Gilded Age” (Jager 8). At any rate, while conceived as a satirical novel on American society, *The Gilded Age* itself testifies to one further pivotal concern in Twain’s era that will be discussed through the urban types depicted within *Red Dead Redemption 2*, that is, the role of art in contemporary consumer culture. Twain and Warner’s novel cleverly delves into the inextricable connection between commerce and art, by at once criticizing and attempting to avail itself of the chances offered by the current state of the economy; the book went through a massive marketing strategy, which was centered on sales

by subscription and newspaper campaigns of advertising and reviewing (Wuster 252, 265).

In terms of structural adaptation, the “Preface” to Twain and Warner’s *The Gilded Age* finds a textual correspondence with the examination of the Gilded Age setting in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Otherwise stated, the literary preface shares with the specific game setting a kind of paratextual analogy based on the introductory nature of both elements. In this regard, a functional example of examination of Twain and Warner’s urban reality in *Red Dead Redemption 2* can be found in Chapter 4 of the video game, since this chapter is entirely set in Saint Denis, a city clearly modeled on the real, historical New Orleans. Indeed, “the bustling city of Saint Denis is a melting pot of cultures and people where businessmen, socialites, sailors, laborers, beggars and thieves all live side by side” (Rockstar Games, “The Frontier, Cities and Towns – Red Dead Redemption 2”). As such, Saint Denis represents the typical Gilded Age metropolis. In this respect, the first main story mission in this chapter, “The Joys of Civilization,” also works as an introductory sequence exposing the urban setting which characterizes the whole game section; the function of this mission, just like the one of an overall game exposition, is to introduce the player to the fictional world (here, of Saint Denis) and its features (see Domsch 32). In the opening dialogue between two major characters – a non-player (Dutch Van der Linde) and a player one (Arthur Morgan) –, the outlaws comment on Saint Denis as follows: “here we are in a strange land . . . America’s very own Gomorrah” / “Yeah, cities all look the same to me” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “The Joys of Civilization”). In the same way, the concluding cutscene in this mission features Arthur Morgan reflecting on the fact that “I cannot decide which I like less . . . the swamps or the city. Both are full of parasite [sic], reptiles and slime. We’re a long way of east of land we know . . . and far from real open country” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “The Joys of Civilization”). Indeed, placed within the new world of the modern city, with its complex social dynamics, the Van der Linde gang in *Red Dead Redemption 2* stands as the last specimen of a ‘romantic’ old world that is dramatically coming to an end. At the same time, this first stage of realist discourse in the game, centered on examination, corresponds with

an initial degree of player involvement. More precisely, both non-player and player characters here are being introduced to the brand-new social situation that is going to unfold as the story goes on. However, if considered in their interaction with (and within) the urban environment of Saint Denis, the major characters do engage in a set of cultural practices that are typical of the new forms of popular entertainment, with special activities and references to venues for amusement – such as the variety show, or the photo studio. Simultaneously, the protagonists are also involved in a number of stranger (i.e. secondary) missions and main story missions that lead them into close contact with a plethora of socio-cultural types of Gilded Age America such as the ones depicted by Twain and Warner – these non-player characters range from the fake upper-class people attending exclusive garden parties, to the wannabe, bohemian, larger-than-life artist.

Representations of Urban Types and Modern Lifestyle: Non-Player Characters

The urban experiences that the main (and player) characters face in *Red Dead Redemption 2* deal with their encounters with typical socio-cultural figures which narratively address the *representation* of the rise of a modern lifestyle – that is, the shadowy, entangled world of business and politics, on the one hand, and the role of art in the emerging consumer society on the other. In terms of storyplaying, these kinds of urban types are non-player characters, each of them endowed with their own individuality and back-story that become an integral part of the main storyline (Domsch 44). In the first place, the non-player character who represents the new urban type of the entrepreneur is Angelo Bronte. Bronte is a wealthy Italian businessman, involved in several criminal activities (such as bribery, smuggling, and racketeering), who substantially controls Saint Denis from the shadows:

“He’s some slick, little, greasy-haired European who’s clearly got power and money”

“Feller like this is gonna have a lot of protection”

“[He] seems to more or less run this city, at least that’s the way he sees it”

“Mr. Bronte is very good friends with the mayor As long as the mayor behaves himself, you know? Mr. Bronte he has . . . that thing, you know? Respect.” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “Angelo Bronte, a Man of Honor”)

On the one hand, Bronte’s experience of being an Italian immigrant in the United States of course fits into the historical “new immigration” from southern (and eastern) Europe, which flourished in the last decades of the century and contributed to the building of modern America (Greene). Simultaneously, Bronte’s criminal activity is an outstanding example of the “crimes of mobility” (Friedman 193) directly connected to this kind of mass migration towards the new American society. Acting within this increasingly mobile environment, a swindler like Bronte can easily emulate an aura of professionalism and respectability, and therefore pass as a reliable patron, thus testifying to the “social ambiguity” typical of the Gilded Age (see Friedman 193-210). In fact, Bronte’s ambiguous contribution to the political life of Saint Denis is best exemplified by his questionable friendship with the Mayor, Henri Lemieux who, in a letter to Bronte, shows all his indebtedness to the Italian businessman:

Yet again, the city is in debt to you and I am flabbergasted by your generosity! The magnificent gift you provided will prove to be a cornerstone in our financing of our dream of establishing a world renowned university in our city.

We are now well on our way to the funds necessary to found both the Divinity School and the Humanities College. Future students in Lemoyne owe a great deal to the vision of men such as you.

I am forever grateful. (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “The Gilded Cage”)¹

Moreover, Mayor Lemieux himself eventually proves to be a double-faced character, that is, a corrupted politician who is inclined to consort with criminals of every kind. The realist representation centered on Lemieux’s characterization is improved through further stranger missions in the video game. Indeed, the mayor is driven by the desire to leave his mark on the cultural life of Saint Denis, even by resorting to the

most controversial methods: Lemieux unquestionably and rather paradoxically declares that “we will strive to improve the city’s moral backbone by any means available to us” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “Idealism and Pragmatism for Beginners III”).

At the same time, the hint at the cultural life of Saint Denis in Lemieux’s letter to Bronte leads to consider the role that art, as well as various forms of popular entertainment, plays in the social and historical development of the late nineteenth-century urban environment. Whereas the new millionaires often “invested large sums in a whole range of cultural institutions including museums, libraries, art galleries, . . . concert halls” (Crocker 213), and universities, highbrow and lowbrow cultural forms coexisted; along with successful popular shows like the vaudeville and musical comedy, a credit for “high” art still went to painting and sculpture (Crocker 213-219). With this context in view, the French artist Charles Châtenay in *Red Dead Redemption 2* embodies a parodic combination between the two socio-cultural realms. Indeed, Châtenay’s characterization is an extremely ironic portrait of the avant-garde, bohemian (i.e. Impressionist) artist. In fact, Châtenay repeatedly describes himself and his art through the following statements:

“Mostly . . . I pose, I show off, I complain”

“Not according to the salons of Paris, no. According to them I cannot draw, I cannot paint . . . So I went away”

“I am an artist, cowboy. I must do what I feel”

“Art should test people, push them. I thought I was a fraud, a no-talent brush washer”

“I am a wanted man, persecuted for my art”

“There is always a heavy demand for fresh mediocrity, but new kinds of brilliance . . . not so much”

“I provoke, I challenge, I amuse . . . do I not?” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “The Artist’s Way” I-IV)

In his pursuit of a truly original and high artistic standard, unappreciated and unacknowledged by both mastering institutions (“the salons”) and the great masses (“heavy demand”), Châtenay also represents an interactive counterpart to the late-nineteenth-century troubled artist, such as the one epitomized by the artist-narrator of H. James’s tale, “The Real Thing.” In this case especially, the transmedia juncture between

literary and video game characters occurs through a primary level of characterization, based on the structural use of connotation in the representation of a non-player character. Like Châtenay does in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, James's artist, too, aspires to create works that can be regarded as highbrow, enduring forms of art expressive of his skills but, unlike Châtenay, he is compelled to draw in order to meet the "heavy demand" coming from the lowbrow popular entertainment:

I worked in black and white, for magazines, for story-books, for sketches of contemporary life, and . . . I couldn't get the honours, to say nothing of the emoluments, of a great painter of portraits out of my head. My "illustrations" were my pot-boilers; I looked to a different branch of art (far and away the most interesting it had always seemed to me), to perpetuate my fame. (James 4)

Firstly, Châtenay's personal story mirrors the struggle enacted by James's artist. Both characters find themselves deeply entangled in the socio-cultural conditions enabling (or hindering) the successful creation of any kind of artwork. The two artists live and work within urban environments – be it the more traditional studio in James's tale, or the broader space of Saint Denis in the video game – that testify to the artist's fierce opposition to the forces of a political and economic logic crushing the valuable reproduction of the 'real thing' (see Bazargan), while raising aesthetic and metafictional questions on how artistic representation (figurative and literary alike) might successfully cope with reality (Monteiro). In his chase after the real thing through art, Châtenay proves himself unable to find his own recognition among the members of two antithetic socio-cultural classes made up of connoisseurs and nonprofessionals. His quest, then, is comparable to the one experienced by James's artist, who eventually fails in his attempt at creating an effective portrait of his quaint pair of models, the Monarchs, while the latter manage to spoil the artist's skill: as James's narrator concedes, "Major and Mrs. Monarch did me a permanent harm, got me into a second-rate trick" (James 41). Moreover, in James's tale, the expression "second-rate trick" may concern the artificial nature of an artwork that stems from a troubling negotiation between appearance and reality, a process that often results in a cheap 'magic trick' of reproducing the real thing.² Secondly,

the basic contrast between appearance and reality, which stands at the core of “The Real Thing,” also marks the fictional narrative of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Châtenay may be rather considered as a fake, because he basically *pretends* to be an artist – he is a fake just like Bronte, who merely emulates a respectable lifestyle. Actually, Châtenay is forced at last to leave Saint Denis, in order to escape from all the trouble he has made there with barkeepers, moneylenders, and partners of his models, although he claims to be looking for the perfect place to express his artistic freedom: “Now, I go to South Pacific, they always tell me the light there is perfect for my work”; “. . . I won’t miss . . . civilization. So repressive. So stifling. I can hardly breathe in the city” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “The Artist’s Way” IV).

As an ‘artist,’ however, Châtenay spends his time in locations devoted to the cultural life of the Gilded Age, such as the art galleries – the Galerie Laurent, among these – displaying paintings, sculptures, and even photographs (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “The Artist’s Way” III). Accordingly, further locations in Saint Denis are emblematic of the influence of commerce and technology on popular culture at the turn of the century (Czitrom 30-59; Litwicks 192-193) – that is, popular theaters where vaudeville shows are being performed, such as the Théâtre Râleur (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “Fatherhood and Other Dreams” II). Yet, the cultural experience of the Gilded Age metropolis in *Red Dead Redemption 2* is not limited to these specific settings for different game missions. In fact, the interaction between characters – both player and non-player ones – and urban locations determines a second degree of player involvement that is deeper than the superficial level represented by the examination and exposition of the game setting. Consequently, the player is further included in the story by enjoying a number of special activities. These free activities entail the possibility to attend a cinematic show in a kinetoscope parlor (like the Fontana Theatre), or to have a photographic portrait taken at a photo studio (as in Marcel Beliveau’s atelier). But, most importantly, in terms of storyplaying, special activities contribute to the development of the realist discourse in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, since they enable the player to participate dynamically in construing the characterization of the modern individual. As the final section will show, in *Red Dead*

Redemption 2, the characterization of the modern individual, performed through the use of a player character, significantly helps build the last and deepest degree of player involvement.

Constructions of Individual Agency and Class Emulation: Player Actions

While acting within the metropolis of Saint Denis, the Van der Linde gang is witness to the historical transition toward the new American society. As Arthur Morgan and his fellow outlaws have to face the challenges of modernity, they partake in the same logic driving the entire urban environment and its inhabitants. Against the background of the combination between realist storytelling and video game storyplaying, the *construction* of this modern individuality takes place in *Red Dead Redemption 2* through a number of player actions that involve the “player’s ability to actively participate in the event,” on the one hand, and “convey more complex narrative information” on the other (Domsch 35). This last stage of realist construction takes place in the video game according to a less straightforward strategy than the ones expressive of the processes of examination and representation of the social world depicted through Saint Denis, in that it addresses a subtler depiction of the player’s character. In this respect, a revealing example of the video game player character conforming to the lifestyle of the modern city occurs in the main story mission titled “A Fine Night of Debauchery.” Here, disguised as a “new money from the oil fields,” Arthur joins in a poker game on a riverboat with the aim of cheating at the game and then robbing the boat. In order to achieve this goal, Arthur must pass as a real millionaire: he plays the part of a man who “has made himself a fortune in the oil fields, and learned himself not a lick of manners or gentlemanly deportment” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “A Fine Night of Debauchery”). In other words, Arthur must somehow emulate a condition of professionalism and respectability, even a social rank he is alien to – just like the urbanites Bronte and Châtenay do. Nevertheless, the Van der Linde gang ultimately fails to adapt to this new world, as the protagonists are fooled by Bronte himself. From his shadowy headquarters, Bronte first suggests that the

gang might organize what will prove as an unsuccessful robbery at the trolley station (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “Urban Pleasures”) and then squeals to the police about the gang’s planning of a bank robbery, that ends up in a daring and thrilling escape from Saint Denis (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “Banking, The Old American Art”).

Despite this plot development through the video game main story, the logic of emulation shared by different kinds of characters in *Red Dead Redemption 2* – the urban type (as in non-player characters) as well as the outlaw (the player character) – represents a proper feature of the modern individual. At a theoretical level, cutting-edge studies on mimesis claim that a certain tendency towards imitation universally characterizes human behavior across time and space, this tendency being “crucial to the history of who we are and can potentially become” (Lawtoo 20). Nevertheless, it is during the American Gilded Age that the logic of emulation takes up a discernible socio-cultural connotation. With reference to literary history, this feature is reflected in realist works such as Crane’s *Maggie*, or Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. In fact, both novels show effective depictions of urban heroes in their struggle for what has been defined as “class mimicry” (Lawson). This “class mimicry” might apparently lead an individual from a lower, working-class condition to an upper-middle-class social rank – according to a process grounded in the material environment of “a culture that dictates desire” (Brown 84). In *Maggie* and *Sister Carrie*, the strategies of class emulation involve specific locations, as well as the characters’ attitudes. For instance, the saloon in New York where Maggie’s suitor Pete works as a bartender and the Chicago art company where Carrie asks for employment do show an outward respectability that questionably matches the inner nature of these places. These locations are described as follows:

The interior of the place was papered in olive and bronze tints of *imitation* leather. A shining bar of *counterfeit* massiveness extended down the side of the room. Behind it a great mahogany-*appearing* sideboard reached the ceiling The elementary senses of it all *seemed* to be opulence and geometrical accuracy. (Crane 46; emphasis added)

At last she entered a picture-framing establishment – the “Great American Art Company” as the window indicated This was one of

those *fake* crayon-portrait companies which were then doing a flourishing business by a system of solicitation and *trickery* which was later exposed and stopped by the police. It was a method of forgery and blackmail, the victims agreeing to pay a very reasonable sum for the crayon portrait, but learning afterward that the frame was not included and also that they had ordered and agreed to pay for that separately. (Dreiser 257; emphasis added)

In both passages, the dichotomy between appearance and reality stands out as a peculiar trait of typical urban locations – the saloon and the art studio – where strategies of imitation predominate, as suggested by the use of verbs such as “appearing” and “seemed.” In addition, the employment of adjectives and nouns like “counterfeit,” “fake,” and “trickery,” closely evokes the same deceiving purposes that govern the actions of non-player characters in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (that is, Bronte and Châtenay), along with the “second-rate trick” played by the Monarchs against James’s artist-narrator. Further examples of this kind of make-believe logic can be found in the imitative attitudes that both Maggie and Carrie have. Early in Crane’s novel, Maggie meticulously tries to decorate her humble apartment in order to make it look like an upper-class place that might catch Pete’s attention and admiration toward her:

She spent some of her week’s pay in the purchase of flowered cretonne for a lambrequin. She made it with infinite care and hung it to the slightly-careening mantel, over the stove, in the kitchen. She studied it with painful anxiety from different points in the room. She wanted it to look well on Sunday night when, perhaps, Jimmie’s friend would come. (Crane 28)

If strictly compared to Maggie’s behavior, Carrie’s attitudes are even more imitative of a higher social condition. In her initial journey to Chicago, she brings with her “a cheap imitation alligator skin satchel” (Dreiser 3). While walking through the city streets, Carrie observes the ladies’ deportment with an intense “desire to imitate it” (Dreiser 99), then she “looked in her mirror and pursed up her lips, accompanying it with a little toss of the head” in a “naturally imitative” way (Dreiser 104); in short, Carrie has “an innate taste for imitation and no small ability”

(Dreiser 157). Then, locations and characters in both *Maggie* and *Sister Carrie* fit into the antithesis between imitation and authenticity that shapes modern American culture – a culture which, by means of emulating first-class standards, is capable of creating convincing simulacra of the real thing (see Orvell 37-54). Similarly, the core ‘imitation vs. authenticity’ tension can be found in “A Fine Night of Debauchery” but with a slight difference in the degree of involvement between novel readers and video game players. In Dreiser’s and Crane’s novels, the reader basically follows the protagonists’ actions and behaviors through the external viewpoint of a third-person narrator; instead, in terms of storyplaying, the video game mission lets the player act directly. In comparison to the examples of literary characterization offered by Dreiser and Crane, the structural focus on mimesis through action in the video game is expressive of a more advanced strategy of characterization of the player character. In fact, before starting the mission, the player has to change Arthur’s outfit by buying a new suit from the tailor, and to style his hair and beard at the barbers. As Arthur’s guide to this mission, Josiah Trelawny, says: “Make this gentleman look like the duke he really is,” “could you smarten up my dear hick friend, here?” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “A Fine Night of Debauchery”). Therefore, these player actions must be taken in order to properly prepare the mission by performing the creditable part of a ‘real’ millionaire, by mimicking and reproducing the distinguished semblance of someone who represents a high social rank.

These concluding remarks show how strategies of class mimicry characterize different kinds of realist narratives that chronicle late-nineteenth-century American lifestyle. In their daydreaming about upward mobility, be it real or pretended, Gilded Age characters in literary works and *Red Dead Redemption 2* chase after the desire of getting rich and respectable – an impulse that drives the individual toward the materialism and consumerism typical of modern America. Whereas these historical phenomena and cultural concerns embedded into realist narratives have been effectively and extensively addressed (as in Corkin), the analogies between literature and video games here retraced, show tighter and mutual connections in terms of transmedia storytelling. With regard to both storytelling and storyplaying, the culture of the American Gilded Age is

portrayed through different artworks and times, which expand from realist novels and tales, such as the narrative works by Crane, Dreiser, James, and Twain and Warner, dating back to the last decades of the nineteenth century up to the interactive worlds of contemporary video gaming. Both literary narratives and *Red Dead Redemption 2* are centered on three crucial stages of realist discourse in association with their interactive analogues – examination/game setting, representation/non-player characters, and construction/player actions. This kind of discourse homology suggests that video games can be read as legitimate literary forms, showing an ongoing vitality that joins popular entertainment and critical inquiry.

Notes:

¹ Here, the mission title “The Gilded Cage” can be read in terms of stylistic irony – that is, as a pun centered on the cultural idea of ‘Gilded Age.’ The mission is entirely set during the high society garden party held at the mayor’s house, and the dialogues between video game characters convey their comments on Bronte being “the worst crook in town,” and that “politics is a foul business” (*Red Dead Redemption 2*, “The Gilded Cage”). Thus, the play on words characterizing the mission title seems to match the parodic effect attained by Twain and Warner in their depiction of late-nineteenth-century American society.

² It is worth noticing the fact that subsequent editions of “The Real Thing,” instead of “second-rate trick,” feature the expression “false ways” (as in the so-called New York Edition of *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, first published in 1907-17), but this variant slightly weakens the connotation of trickery inherent to the practice of artistic representation.

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