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Rockstar Games and American History

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

Department of History

University of Warwick

March 2019

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisor, Professor J.E. Smyth. Your knowledge and guidance have been invaluable in navigating the PhD experience, and I am so grateful for your endless encouragement and belief in me. To my family, and especially my parents, who have always supported my academic endeavours. Thank you for being there to remind me that there was and is life outside of them. Thank you to all the people who were there to support or humour me, even when I was in the pits of PhD despair, especially Somak Biswas, Andrew Burchell, Jo Tierney, Liana Valerio, Christian Velasco Reyes, Holly Winter, and the rest of the Warwick History PhD Battalion, Hannah Graves, John Wills, Adam Chapman, Sian Beavers, Nick Webber, Charlotte Stevens, David Anderson, Lydia Plath, Steven Sarson, David Cavell, and Chris Chamberlain. To Emily Marlow: Thank you for all the culture trips and conversations about work, life, art, and beyond. And to Ed Vollans: thank you for your limitless daily supply of patience, reassurance, and understanding. Finally, an honourable mention to everyone who suggested that I must have had a 'misspent youth playing video games'. Well, probably.

Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

Parts of this thesis have been published by the author:

Esther Wright, 'Marketing Authenticity: Rockstar Games and the Use of Cinema in Video Game Promotion', *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture,* 7.1 (2017): 131-164.

Esther Wright, 'On the Promotional Context of Historical Video Games', *Rethinking History*, 22.4 (2018): 598-608.

Where possible, I have captured and included screenshots from my own video game playthroughs, and screenshots of marketing materials and webpages to illustrate my argument. All images remain the property of, and should be attributed to their developer and/or publisher: Rockstar Games and Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.

Abstract

This thesis has two immediate, complementary purposes. Firstly, it studies the way that controversial game developer and publisher Rockstar Games interprets and represents American history. In doing so, it uses as case studies two of Rockstar's most explicitly historical titles: *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and *L.A. Noire* (2011), while making reference to specific titles in the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (1997-). It interrogates the ways Rockstar have represented America's past, and use references to wider popular culture – for example, cinema, television, and literature – to do so.

Moreover, the second purpose of the thesis is to provide a foundational argument for studying the promotional discourses and paratextual materials of historical video games. By using Rockstar as a case study, it argues that we are better equipped to understand how video games represent the past by considering how these representations are framed and sold to players before they are released. This thesis therefore surveys the way that discourses of 'authenticity' were and are deliberately generated by Rockstar, attempting to manage the reception of their historiographical work. It studies the ways in which reference to historical 'facts' and primary evidence, as well as wider cultural genres like the Western and *noir*, are used to prop up these promotional discourses and generate expectations.

While situated within the field of historical game studies, this thesis employs a distinctly interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on historical research, media studies, and theories of branding and promotion. Over the course of five significant chapters, it traces the influence of the 'Rockstar Brand' on their games' representation of America's past. It notes the way that paratextual discourses reveal the interpretations of the developer, as well as acting as sites at which game developers actively embody and perform the role of 'developer-historian'. This thesis surveys corporate material and official communication, Rockstar-generated blog posts and other promotional materials associated with the release of *Red Dead Redemption* and *L.A. Noire*, and developer interviews published by the gaming and entertainment press. Ultimately, it argues that the pursuit of 'authenticity' leads to an oversimplification of historical complexities, while textual and paratextual content overwhelmingly privilege white masculinity, confining all *others* to the margins.

List of Abbreviations

DLC	Downloadable Content
GTA	*Grand Theft Auto* (series)
GTA III	*Grand Theft Auto III* (2001)
GTA IV	*Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008)
GTAV	*Grand Theft Auto V* (2013)
GTAVC	*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002)
LAN	*L.A. Noire* (2011)
NPC	Non-Player Character
RDR	*Red Dead Redemption* (2010)
RDR2	*Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018)

Introduction: The American History of Rockstar Games

In April 2018 *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013, *GTAV*) became the most profitable entertainment product ever released. Earning $6 billion to date, it more than doubled the revenues of *Avatar* (2009), the highest-grossing film of all time.[1] Selling over 90 million units ensured *GTAV*'s success far eclipsed other best-selling video games – even the combined success of previous titles in the *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) franchise.[2] For better or worse, *GTA*'s developer Rockstar Games consistently drives the medium to the forefront of the entertainment industry. As press releases are keen to reaffirm, Rockstar 'has helped propel interactive entertainment into the cent[re] of modern culture.'[3]

For over twenty years, Rockstar have almost exclusively developed or published games set in real or fictionalised American spaces. Creating games for global audiences since 1998, Rockstar's brand image is inextricably interlinked with games that offer 'limitless', interactive access to how things are/were. Equally however, these representations are heavily mediated and influenced by American culture, politics, society and history's commoditised global images. As Rockstar's VP of Creative Dan Houser claimed, *GTA* 'isn't really about America, it's about Americana […]. It's the America that was sold to the world.'[4] Referencing social issues, political climates, and popular culture, Rockstar's games are marketed as a blend of collective, globalised perceptions about the 'real' America.

Rockstar's dependence on 'Americana' is notable for a company that continues to be run under majority British management and creative direction. Though Rockstar

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[1] MarketWatch, 'This Violent Videogame Has Made More Money than Any Movie Ever', *MarketWatch*, 9 April 2018, https://www.marketwatch.com/story/this-violent-videogame-has-made-more-money-than-any-movie-ever-2018-04-06 [accessed 9 April 2018]; James Batchelor, '*GTA V* Is the Most Profitable Entertainment Product of All Time', *Gamesindustry.Biz*, 9 April 2018, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-04-09-gta-v-is-the-most-profitable-entertainment-product-of-all-time [accessed 9 April 2018].

[2] Batchelor, '*GTA V* Is the Most Profitable Entertainment Product of All Time'. Take-Two Interactive Software's annual report for the 2018 fiscal year puts the number at 95 million units. See Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Annual Report 2018', http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-reportsannual [accessed 27 August 2018].

[3] Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games Announces 4 New Versions of *L.A. Noire* coming November 17, 2017', Press Release, 7 September 2017, *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc*, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=2299157 [accessed 27 August 2018].

[4] Quote from Dan Houser in Ben McKelvey, 'Meet the brains behind *Grand Theft Auto*', 27 December 2012, *Stuff*, http://www.stuff.co.nz/technology/games/8122020/Meet-the-brains-behind-Grand-Theft-Auto [accessed 14 December 2016].

has studios across the world,[5] *GTA*'s lead developing studio, Rockstar North, is based in Edinburgh.[6] Rockstar was founded by British born, former music industry executive Sam Houser, who remains the company's president. His brother, Dan Houser, is credited as co-founder, and both have produced or executive-produced most of Rockstar's titles. Dan Houser receives a writing credit for most *GTA* titles, along with many other Rockstar's franchises. The Housers often spearhead marketing and public-facing commentary on Rockstar and their titles, making them synonymous with the brand's continued success and mystique. Though based out of SoHo headquarters in New York ('Rockstar NYC'), the Housers are viewed as exemplar British success stories; publicly lauded as figures that have 'changed the face of video games.'[7]

GTA has historically been the mainstay of Rockstar's financial success and cultural capital, as well as the financial success as continued security of Rockstar's parent company, the multinational publisher Take-Two Interactive Software (Take-Two).[8] But in 2011, Take-Two achieved 'profitability' without releasing a *GTA* title: 'a key objective' for the company since 2007.[9] This was due to the release of, among other titles, *Red Dead Redemption* (2010, *RDR*): an 'open world' Western epic, based around the story of former outlaws and set at the turn of the twentieth century. The game was a 'break-out hit', one of the most successful game releases of the year, and 'established a new franchise' for Rockstar.[10] It was credited with helping to increase net revenue (within and beyond the U.S. market) and cash flow for Take-Two in that financial year.[11]

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[5] Rockstar has major subsidiary studios in the United Kingdom, the U.S., Canada, and India.

[6] See Rockstar North, http://www.rockstarnorth.com [accessed 30 August 2018].

[7] Quote attributed to Alex Simmons, *IGN UK* editor, in Joe Utichi, 'The Biggest Entertainment Release Ever?,' *The Sunday Times*, 8 September 2013, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-biggest-entertainment-release-ever-mt593dw7f5c [accessed 27 August 2018].

[8] Rockstar is a wholly-owned publisher and developer under Take-Two, which also owns video game brands such as 2K Games. 2K Games also develops and publishes a number of historical games (e.g. the *Sid Meier's Civilization* (1991-), *Elder Scrolls* (1994), *Bioshock* (2007-2013) and *Mafia* (2002-2016) franchises), but also publish games that have some relationship to American sports culture; 2K Sports games, such as the *NBA 2K* (2005-) and *NHL 2K* (2000-) franchises. Details in Take-Two's annual reports confirm Rockstar's importance to Take-Two's financial security; indeed, they actively foreground this to stakeholders. *GTA* titles account for a substantial percentage of Take-Two's earnings, and thus the continued success of the *GTA* brand, and the retention of key Rockstar personnel, is noted as a risk factor for Take-Two's business. Statement to this effect appear in the Annual Reports for 2008, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 (2010 Annual Report is missing). Listed as 'key accomplishments' in Take-Two's annual report for 2011 was 'extended long-term employment agreements with Rockstar Games' key creative talent', while elsewhere the report noted its dependency on certain management and product development personnel for 'continued success'. See Take Two Interactive Software, Inc., 'Annual Report 2011', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.*, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-reportsannual [accessed 21 May 2016], 7, 9.

[9] 'Annual Report 2011'.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Other titles that contributed to this were named as *NBA 2K11* and *Mafia II* (2010). See ibid., 30-31; 39. It was noted that net revenue decreased for the fiscal year 2012 due to lower sales, relative to sales following

Take-Two's annual report for 2011 also drew attention to the fact that expenses relating to 'selling and marketing' increased by $21.8 million for the year due to 'higher advertising expenses related to [*RDR*] and [2K Games title] *Mafia II*'.[12] Similarly, costs increased by a further $7.5 million in the following fiscal year, due to the need to advertise new releases. One of these was an acquisition that would soon become a canonical Rockstar title: *L.A. Noire* (2011, *LAN*),[13] a police-procedural game set in post-war Los Angeles, offering an historical narrative about World War II veterans, the Los Angeles Police Department, and institutional corruption through a distinctly *noir* lens. It was acquired by Rockstar in 2006 and co-developed with the now-defunct Sydney-based Team Bondi. Published by Rockstar in 2011, *LAN* was debuted at the Tribeca Film Festival,[14] and immediately acclaimed as a game with the potential to change the face of the industry.[15] Rockstar's proclivity for making games about America therefore extends beyond reimagining contemporary and late-twentieth century American cities through *GTA*, to include the landscapes of America's past, urban and rural.

Both *RDR* and *LAN* have had afterlives following their initial debuts. Originally released for PC, PlayStation3 and Xbox360 consoles, *LAN* received a 4K remaster for PlayStation4 and XboxOne in late 2017, and was modified and released for Virtual Reality and Nintendo Switch platforms. *RDR* was followed by a prequel, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*), in October 2018, and when Rockstar teased the game in 2016 with a single image on Twitter, Take-Two's stock 'exploded'.[16] Even before its release, the game was the

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the release of certain games including *RDR*. See Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., 'Annual Report 2012', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.,* http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-reportsannual [accessed 21 May 2016], 31.

[12] The latter title is another historical video game developed by 2K Games. 'Annual Report 2011', 31.

[13] 'Annual Report 2012', 31.

[14] *LAN* was described by Tribeca's Chief Creative Officer Geoff Gilmore as 'an invention of a new realm of storytelling that is part cinema, part gaming, and a whole new realm of narrative expression, interactivity, and immersion. We are poised on the edge of a new frontier.' When it was premiered at the festival, the screening included an exclusive look at a complete 'case', which was 'followed by a Q&A exploring the crossover between filmmaking and interactive entertainment.' See 'L.A. Noire Honored as First Videogame to Make Official Selection of the Tribeca Film Festival', *Rockstar Newswire*, 29 March 2011, https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/14861/la-noire-honored-as-first-videogame-to-make-official-selection-o.html [accessed 10 Mary 2016]. The game has been archived on the Tribeca Film Festival's website: categorised as a 'thriller' and giving details of a runtime of '60 minutes'. See 'L.A. Noire', Film Guide Archive, *Tribeca Film Festival*, https://tribecafilm.com/filmguide/archive/512cde961c7d76e0460004e9-l-a-noire [accessed 10 May 2016].

[15] The promise of *LAN* was arguably never fulfilled. For a recent re-evaluation of the promise the game supposedly held for the games industry, see Scott Meslow, 'Revisiting *L.A. Noire*, the Game That Nearly Revolutionized the Video Game Industry,' *GQ*, November 20, 2017, https://www.gq.com/story/revisiting-la-noire [accessed 30 August 2018].

[16] Ben Gilbert, '"Grand Theft Auto" is so influential, the company's stock just exploded after teasing a new game' *Business Insider,* 17 October 2016, http://uk.businessinsider.com/take-two-interactive-stock-explodes-red-dead-redemption-2-2016-10?r=US&IR=T [accessed 27 August 2018].

anticipated bestseller of 2018.[17] Executives sought to actively manage player expectations, cautioning them not to expect another *GTAV*.[18]

These games are Rockstar-authored histories – of the American West, and post-war American society – but as usual Rockstar constructed historical narratives through the prism of popular culture's preestablished genre conventions and iconographies. An intrinsic part of Rockstar's business is, therefore, the construction and sale of historical worlds, gameplay options and narratives to a global audience. Because, of course, the development of mainstream video games is an expensive undertaking,[19] and the eventual product competes in a globalised, capitalistic game marketplace, Rockstar's project is supported by co-ordinated, multi-million-dollar cross-media marketing campaigns, intended to sell the authenticity – historical or otherwise – of their titles, and establish them as profitable, *historical* franchises. Take-Two – a multimedia conglomerate that actively manages the brands of numerous game franchises and two major developers – invested millions in advertising, hoping to establish them as such. Part of the focus of this thesis is to interrogate how Rockstar used varying types of advertising and promotion to do much more than this: namely, to prefigure and extend the meaning of the historical narratives and worlds of their games beyond their textual boundaries.

This project's purpose, however, is not simply to study Rockstar and their historical project, though these parameters are the foundations for this research. This thesis has another, more immediate purpose, for which Rockstar – given their position

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[17] Ben Walker, 'NPD Claim *Red Dead Redemption 2* Will Be The Best Selling Game of 2018', *VGR*, 6 July 2018, https://www.vgr.com/red-dead-redemption-2-best-selling-game-2018/ [accessed 27 August 2018]; Robin Burks, '*Red Dead Redemption* Will Be The Best Selling Game of 2018 Says NPD', *ScreenRant*, 10 July 2018, https://screenrant.com/red-dead-redemption-2-2018-sales-predictions/ [accessed 27 August 2018].

[18] See for example Robin Fahey, 'Coming out from under *Grand Theft Auto's* Shadow', *gamesindustry.biz*, 6 July 2018, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-07-06-coming-out-from-under-grand-theft-autos-shadow [accessed 27 August 2018]; Imran Khan, 'Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick Remarks On Whether *Red Dead Redemption II* Will Sell As Well As GTA', *gameinformer*, 26 June 2018, https://www.gameinformer.com/2018/06/26/take-two-ceo-strauss-zelnick-remarks-on-whether-red-dead-redemption-ii-will-sell-as-well [accessed 27 August 2018]; James Batchelor, 'Take-Two: "We don't believe in *Red Dead Redemption 2* success until we deliver it"', *gamesindustry.biz*, 2 July 2018, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-07-02-running-scared-from-red-dead-redemption-2 [accessed 27 August 2018].

[19] Rockstar's budgets for their projects are speculated to be in excess of between fifty and one-hundred million dollars. *LAN* was reported to have cost around $50million to develop. See Kev Geoghegan, 'Will *L.A. Noire* Change the Game for Actors?', *BBC News*, 27 May 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-13507355 [accessed 14 April 2016]; *RDR*'s budget is speculated 'at between 80 and 100 million' dollars. See Seth Schiesel, 'Way Down Deep in the Wild, Wild West', *The New York Times*, 16 May 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/17/arts/television/ 17dead.html [accessed 15 May 2018]. *Max Payne 3*, *GTAIV*, and *GTAV* reportedly cost around $105million, $100million, and $265million respectively, making *GTAV* (at the time of the article's publication) the most expensive video game of all time. See Lance Cartelli, '20 of the Most Expensive Games Ever Made', *Gamespot*, 29 May 2015, https://www.gamespot.com/gallery/20-of-the-most-expensive-games-ever-made/2900-104/ [accessed 17 June 2017].

within the industry and their development history – serve as an apt case study. By investigating the marketing strategies for two of Rockstar's most resolutely historical games, *RDR* and *LAN*, this work argues that accounting for the promotional discourses that surround any historical game's release can enrich our understanding of the ways game developers interpret, represent, and manipulate the past for a global audience. This thesis therefore interrogates how discourses of authenticity – as well as pre-existing popular and academic discourses on America's past – shape these representations. It ultimately asks: how have Rockstar represented and marketed the past, and in doing so, how do they create their own American history?

Historical Games Studies and the 'developer-historian'

Though necessarily drawing on scholarship from a variety of academic disciplines – in particular history, promotional media studies, game studies, and film studies – this thesis is situated firmly within, and aims to extend current scholarship on *historical games*. As an overlapping subfield of game studies and historical research, the development of historical game studies is still comparatively recent. But as Matthew Kappel and Andrew Elliott noted in 2013, rather than asking '*whether* it is possible to engage with history in popular culture', most academics studying these games now look toward theorising '*what kind of engagement* this is, what it means, who is doing the engagement (the designer, writer, player, modder), and what it means for our subsequent understanding of the past.'[20] The field has expanded since then, and the variety of the work undertaken is increasingly vital in terms of making sense of how games persist in representing not just the past, but also collective knowledge and experience of it, as well as perceptions of historical practice: the process of 'doing' history.[21]

Adam Chapman, in the first single-authored work to propose a framework for studying historical games, explores the concept of the '*(hi)story-play*-space'.[22] Within a given historical game, a sense of meaning or 'historical resonance' is created by what players choose to 'do' – to create or enact a preestablished narrative – and how they subsequently

[20] Andrew B. R. Elliott and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, 'Introduction: To Build a Past That Will "Stand the Test of Time" – Discovering Historical Facts, Assembling Historical Narratives', in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 9.

[21] For an overview, see Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, 'Introduction: What Is Historical Game Studies?', *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2016): 358–71; Esther Wright, 'On the Promotional Context of Historical Video Games', *Rethinking History* 22, no. 4 (2018): 598–608.

[22] Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

'read' this representation. This facilitates 'the establishment of a link between a game's historical representation and the larger historical discourse, as the player understands it'.[23] However, the potential for 'doing' any combination of in-game activities, and thus the ensuing 'reading' of the historical narratives created,[24] are inevitably limited and controlled. These limits are set by the game's developer, for whom Chapman suggests the use of the moniker *'developer-historian'*. Like 'traditional' historians, the game creator(s) write histories and thus represent the past by finding, interpreting, and deploying historical evidence. Moreover, '[b]y establishing rules and win conditions (with concurrent narrative outcomes), developer-historian's preferred meanings can still be strongly produced, despite the multiplicity of game narratives and player agency.'[25] Therefore, the vision of history developers want to create can be studied in terms of their design choices, and the possible 'affordances' they do (or indeed, do not) offer players.[26] These games 'afford players particular actions' and explorations within certain (re)imagined spaces,[27] and game developers 'create these affordances in relation to commercial viability, technological capabilities, genre conventions, and, in historical games, the history being represented.'[28] In summary, by making certain gameplay options more visible and/or easily-accessible to the player, historical games 'reward narrative outcomes they wish to promote and punish actions that conflict with [the developer's] interpretation' of history.[29]

Yet while Chapman's framework is designed to be broadly applicable across the landscape of digital games, '[a]dditions' are necessary to study these texts beyond their formal components and how players may access them. That is, academics also need to incorporate lines of inquiry which consider a game's historical content and themes, as well as 'other surrounding aspects […] such as marketing elements like advertising, box-art, or the hardware on which these games are played'.[30] The way players are implicitly or

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[23] Ibid., 36.
[24] Ibid., 31.
[25] Ibid., 40.
[26] Adam Chapman, 'Affording History: *Civilization* and the Ecological Approach', in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 61–73.
[27] Ibid., 62.
[28] Adrienne Shaw, 'The Tyranny of Realism: Historical Accuracy and Politics of Representation in *Assassin's Creed III*', *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9, no. 14 (2015): 15; citing Chapman, 'Affording History', 62–63.
[29] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 40.
[30] Ibid., 269; Briefly discussed in Jeremiah McCall and Adam Chapman, 'The Debate Is on: Historical Accuracy in Historical Video Games (Part 2)', *Gaming The Past*, 8 April 2018, https://gamingthepast.net/2018/04/08/discussion-authenticity-the-characteristics-of-a-historical-game/ [accessed 8 April 2018].

explicitly encouraged to interact with games – via the games' own affordances or promotional discourses they may encounter before or during playing – are therefore crucial sites of study, and this thesis aims to provide a foundation for these 'additions'. By utilising Chapman's concept of the developer-historian, and the notion that these games offer a *'(hi)story-play-space'* populated by developers with potential player interactions, this thesis will interrogate the way in which Rockstar can be seen to function as, as well as to actively perform the role of developer-historian, in creating games that claim to represent America's past. Building upon this framework for analysis, this thesis includes a study of the paratextual or ancillary materials[31] around the release of these games, and the developer-historian's wider portfolio and brand identity, as other vital areas of study.

Rockstar are especially useful as an industrial case study: owing to both their dedication to developing video games that are resolutely 'American' (and usually in some way 'historical'), and to their stringent adherence to a carefully controlled brand image. Closely considering Rockstar provides us with a potent example of how the paratextual surround interacts with and/or attempts to shape and control the meaning and representation of the past in the games themselves, and how studying a game's paratexts in concert with the game itself can complement any attempt to gauge what a developer does to and with historical knowledge.

Moreover, Rockstar's proclivity for relying on other forms of popular culture to construct their games aids discussion of popular remembrance of American history. Having always demonstrated a penchant for intertextually referencing, or otherwise outright remediating American cinema and other media in their titles,[32] we can explore how popular images and discourses about history – those that have already been created through numerous historical agendas – influence the construction and marketing of 'new' historical discourse. Using two of Rockstar's titles that explicitly intersect with American history and the history of cinema affords the greatest potential for doing so.

Their formal components also play a significant role. Chapman classifies both *RDR* and *LAN* as '*realist-simulation style*' games. Along with other mainstream franchises like *Assassin's Creed* (2007-), *Mafia* (2002-2016), *Call of Duty* (2003-) and *Medal of Honor*

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[31] These labels are provided by Martin Barker, 'Speaking of "Paratexts": A Theoretical Revisitation', *Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 235–49.

[32] Here I refer to the concept of remediation as developed by Bolter and Grusin. See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

(1999-2012), 'the biggest selling' historical games tend to employ this simulation style.[33] This classification is useful because it does not, however, 'refer to the game's historical accuracy' and specificities of content *per say*. Rather, it epitomises 'the way in which [these games] represent the past and the general claims that this involves.'[34] This simulation style in and of itself suggests that an attempt is being made to show the past as it would have appeared to a relatively small number of contemporaries,[35] and the 'implicit claim' is made 'that the past is being *shown* in a way that relates to notions of authenticity.'[36] Adopting or attempting a kind of 'visual "realism"', reliant on 'the familiar audio-visual codes and tropes of western cinema', is fundamental to this simulation style.[37]

Chapman further develops the concept to explain that this simulation style tends to be closest to 'reconstructionist epistemology' – the claim that the past exists independently of the historian and is waiting to be empirically reconstructed. While empiricism and pure 'objectivity' are generally considered out-dated modes of historical thought,[38] these games offer what Roland Barthes deemed 'the reality effect' by creating rich, meticulously-detailed historical spaces for player access.[39] Yet they often do so by reproducing subjective, shifting popular discourses on historical 'accuracy' and 'authenticity', as well as relying heavily on 'existing realist visual discourses' drawn from the wider media, such as historical film and television.[40] As Chapman observes, the relative 'popularity of *reconstructionist* history is unsurprising, after all the authoritarian promise of a look at how it really was, at *the* story, at how the historical world appeared to those who lived there, has an undeniable attraction,' and indeed, benefit to audio-visual histories.[41] They can offer a simplistic, 'authentic' experience of past periods, uncomplicated by the complexities and unknowns of written, academic histories.

As will be explored, this particular epistemological stance seems a perfect fit for the vision of history Rockstar offer players. Yet it has disquieting consequences, in that it seeks to diminish the role the (developer-)historian's inclinations play in the construction of historical representations. Granted, selectivity and the reduction of wider events and

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[33] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 68.
[34] Ibid., 61.
[35] The reason for this in particular may be due to budget or technological constraints. See Ibid., 63.
[36] Emphasis in original text. Ibid., 61.
[37] Ibid., 62.
[38] See Peter Novick for discussion of the objectivity crisis in the historical profession more generally. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
[39] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 68–69; citing Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 141.
[40] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 68; 64–65.
[41] Emphasis in original. Ibid., 69.

circumstances to fit engagement with the past 'is a part of history as a representational practice in *any* form'. While, 'these criticisms do not […] stop games being history',[42] and they undeniably offer 'a level of authenticity', they often ignore 'the actual relationship between the past and history', while struggling to 'present alternatives, ambiguity or uncertainty, all key aspects of historical discourse.'[43]

This is because there is currency in historicity; or, perhaps more appropriately, there is currency in creating and commodifying the feeling of 'authenticity'. That is, the 'cultural climate of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in America has incubated […] the rapacious insistence on authenticity—although there is little agreement as to what constitutes "authenticity" at all'.[44] Historical games are often marketed and judged – by reviewers and players alike – in terms of the sense of authenticity they offer.[45] This is usually used as a selling point in their marketing ahead of release, and the often messy distinctions between claims of 'accuracy' and 'authenticity' can cause controversy among fans.[46] Within the existing scholarship, there are debates over the meanings of 'historical authenticity' and 'accuracy' where these subjective terms apply to video games.[47] As with film – and other forms of media engagement with history – the kind of

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[42] Chapman does so by reflecting on the work of critics of history (e.g. Alan Munslow and Hayden White) who sought to expose the inherent limitations of all forms of historical practice, including the traditional practice of historiography made by historians, and building on the works of academics who have sought to advocate for history in other popular cultural forms to be taken just as seriously, while defining these new visual/digital histories in their own right (e.g. Robert Rosenstone). See Chapman, *Digital Games as History,* 41; Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012); Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[43] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 69.

[44] Katherine Edwards, 'Privileged Access: Constructed Memories and the Autobiographical Impulse', in *The Paradox of Authenticity in a Globalized World*, ed. Russell Cobb (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 206.

[45] This tendency is widespread in games journalism, and it oftentimes supported by the propensity of historians to comment on the historical content and context of specific games in the media. See for example the *History Respawned* series of podcasts. See also Holly Nielsen, '*Call of Duty: WWII* could be the most important game of all time for historians', *The Guardian*, 25 April 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/25/call-of-duty-wwii-historians-video-games-activision [accessed 25 April 2017]; Holly Nielsen, 'Reductive, superficial, beautiful – a historian's view of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*', *The Guardian*, 9 December 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/ technology/2015/dec/09/assassins-creed-syndicate-historian-ubisoft [accessed 9 December 2015].

[46] For recent example, see Jordan Lukomski, '"Accuracy" vs Inclusivity: Women in Historical Games', *Not Your Mama's Gamer*, 5 October 2018, https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=17807 [accessed 5 October 2018].

[47] See for example Tara Jane Copplestone, 'But That's Not Accurate: The Differing Perceptions of Accuracy in Cultural-Heritage Videogames between Creators, Consumers and Critics', *Rethinking History*, 2016; Jeremiah McCall and Adam Chapman, 'Discussion: Historical Accuracy and Historical Video Games (Part 1)', *Gaming The Past*, 27 December 2017, https://gamingthepast.net/2017/12/26/discussion-what-is-historical-accuracy-in-an-historical-video-game-part-1/; McCall and Chapman, 'The Debate Is on: Historical Accuracy in Historical Video Games (Part 2)'.

historical 'authenticity' that developers construct is inherently 'selective', and dependent on numerous factors that underpin it.[48]

While these texts are preoccupied with presenting 'authenticity' and/or 'realism' – and the two terms are often used interchangeably – it is not a 'documentary realism': these are games, to put Linda Hutcheon's words in another context, 'about our cultural representations of the past, our discourse *about*' it, embodying (and commodifying) the very postmodern 'realization that what we "know" of the past derives from the discourses of the past'.[49] This is something that Chapman also acknowledges when considering the way the narrative that derives from playing an historical game (the emergent '*ludonarrative*') offers players a kind of satisfaction because it allows them to re-enact or '*(re)perform*[…]' cultural memories. That is, satisfaction may come from being able to create sequences that correspond to what we know of 'larger historical discourse': 'the stories we tell *about* the past'. Players are therefore explicitly rewarded with achievements or in-game bonuses, when they perform or 'echo' familiar sequences of action, stories or tropes; especially those already portrayed in genre cinema.[50] For example, by examining how First Person Shooter (FPS) games interact with wider discourses, Jerome de Groot argued that developers attempt to instil authenticity by borrowing from films and their rhetoric –

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[48] Andrew. J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, 'Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past', in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 153–68.

[49] Linda Hutcheon makes these points in studying the development and poetics of Historiographic Metafiction, however, the general argument she makes about postmodern engagements with history and our knowledge of it is relevant here. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 136.

[50] Here, Chapman cites the useful example of *Max Payne 3* (2013), a contemporaneously-set Rockstar title, which rewards players with an achievement for mimicking sequences like that of Hong Kong Action cinema: doing things 'like the movies'. See Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 139; See also Jerome de Groot, 'Empathy and Enfranchisement: Popular Histories', *Rethinking History* 10, no. 3 (2006): 407–8; This is echoed in scholarship on the intersection of cinema and games more broadly. See for example Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, eds., *Screenplay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2002); Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers, 'Introduction: Manifest Narrativity – Video Games, Movies, and Art and Adaptation', in *Game On, Hollywood! Essays on the Intersections of Video Games and Cinema*, ed. Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2015), 7–18.

especially Hollywood war films.[51] Resultantly, dominant narratives often get reproduced mimetically, and certain periods and events are 'a popular past for players to visit.'[52]

Yet as Adrienne Shaw proposes, there is a certain 'tyranny' to developers' (or here, the developer-historian's) insistence on 'realism' and 'authenticity', because they are 'force[d] […] to focus too much on questions of accuracy', which 'close down the possibility of imagining history otherwise'. That is, commercial viability and/or audience expectations often dictate how to create something that seems believable within the confines of popular knowledge about the past, rather than offering access to aspects of history that are not often incorporated into aforementioned dominant narratives.[53] Thus, as Shaw notes, realism is often used or alluded to in marketing discourses 'to pre-empt criticism' of a developer's 'historying' choices; and often, this 'deployment of realism' can 'obscure some of [a] game's more insidious ideological arguments.'[54]

As such, authenticity is not an inherent property of a product, but rather it is a claim made for it by an agent – a kind of 'authenticity work' which can be either received positively or negatively.[55] To quote Martin Barker, the marketing of 'authenticity' is an attempt 'to ensure that something occurs by dint of announcing it'.[56] In this sense, the game creators who function in the role of developer-historian are implicated, not only by the choices they make in creating titles that aspire to be historical representations, but also in the way they attempt to sell them as authentic to potential players. In Rockstar's case, the repeated reference in promotional materials to a certain tone, mood, spirit, or other sensual expressions highlights the useful subjectivity of 'authentic' constituent elements. The right sorts of validating 'facts' and allusions, when marshalled into a

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[51] de Groot, 'Empathy and Enfranchisement', 407-408 especially; A number of academics have already noted the reliance on previously-mediated versions of the past when constructing the representation of history in video games, and this is often the case in considering games about World War II; for example Debra Ramsay, 'Brutal Games: *Call of Duty* and the Cultural Narrative of World War II', *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 2 (2015): 94–113; Chapman, *Digital Games as History*; Salvati and Bullinger, 'Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past'; For work on other historical wars, see Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Holger Pötzsch and Vít Šisler, 'Playing Cultural Memory: Framing History in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* and *Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination*', *Games and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2016): 3–25; Piotr Sterczewski, 'This Uprising of Mine: Game Conventions, Cultural Memory and Civilian Experience of War in Polish Games', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016).

[52] John Wills, 'Pixel Cowboys and Silicon Gold Mines: Videogames of the American West', *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 2 (2008): 276.

[53] Shaw, 'The Tyranny of Realism', 21.

[54] Ibid., 5; 7.

[55] Richard A. Peterson, 'In Search of Authenticity*', *Journal of Management Studies* 42, no. 5 (2005): 1083–98; For application to game studies (particularly to Indie Games), see for example Jesper Juul, 'High-Tech Low-Tech Authenticity: The Creation of Independent Style at the Independent Games Festival', in *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, 2014.

[56] Martin Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials — A Critique and Research Proposal,' *Scope*, 2004.

promotional discourse, is often used as proof of the lengths to which a developer may go to authentically historicise. While acknowledging that the use of the term is fraught with complications and contradictions,[57] rather than trying to provide a definitive definition for what 'historical authenticity' means, this thesis interrogates what Rockstar *suggest* that 'authenticity' is, and how they construct these claims implicitly or explicitly.

Moreover, *RDR* and *LAN*'s apparent epistemological stance also overshadows the way that the narratives often-repeated in games prop up dominant historiographical consensus. William Uricchio notes that while the play function and agency games offer should suggest possibilities for 'reflexivity and subjectivity' – and indeed, the potential for 'poststructuralist critique' – the form often (and arguably, continues) to present 'sites of stubborn adherence to the historiographic status quo'.[58] Soraya Murray more recently affirmed that 'with little exception', mainstream games 'present a vision of the world that is devoid of postmodern, post-structural, postcolonial, feminist, queer, or any other critical intervention.'[59] It is worth noting, however, as Chapman summarises, that 'professional historiography' is also often 'far too hegemonic', largely missing opportunities to account for anyone *other* than white men. Though historiographical movements and waves try to combat this – for example, historians of race, sexuality and gender – the disruption of popular consensus and dominant narratives proves difficult.[60] This point becomes increasingly relevant in later chapters, when this thesis more closely explores the way that Rockstar's chosen simulation style, corresponding epistemology, and claims for authenticity combine to inherently stack the odds against these games'

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[57] For a broad overview of theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of authenticity, see for example Julia Straub, 'Introduction: The Paradoxes of Authenticity', in *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies on a Critical Concept* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 9–29.

[58] William Uricchio, 'Simulation, History, and Computer Games,' in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 335.

[59] Soraya Murray, 'The Poetics of Form and the Politics of Identity in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*,' *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* Special Issue: Gender Issues in Video Games (July 2017): 84; See also Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Souvik Mukherjee, 'Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism,' *Games and Culture* 13, no. 5 (2018): 504–20; Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer Game Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Indeed, as Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska have noted, in games 'as elsewhere' in the media, it is 'dominant values' which 'are likely to be structured into gameplay and representational frameworks […] simply because they are dominant, and thus familiar and often taken for granted, capable of providing what appears (ideologically) to be a relatively neutral background for in game tasks.' See Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 194.

[60] Chapman, *Digital Games as History,* 47; This is echoed by historians of historiography. As Peter Novick outlined, the always dialectical nature and more recent destabilisation of the idea of 'historical objectivity' in both the historical profession, and wider postmodern culture since the mid-to-late twentieth century, gave rise to the forceful reassertion of overarching, narrative-like histories of an 'inherent political conservatism', that centered only around the actions of specific, seemingly significant individuals. See Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 622.

potential to include anything but monolithic – though 'authentic'-seeming – historical narratives.

In summation, while allowing millions of people access to representations of the past, these representations are often as problematic as professional historiography has been deemed: whether because video games are thought of merely as 'entertainment products', a game's historical content includes 'simple inaccuracies', or, more troublingly, when games offer 'widespread exclusionary historical representations (particularly in terms of gender, sexuality and ethnicity).'[61] The fact that the medium inherently allows for the transformation of complex historical events and periods into inherently finite game narratives and options is arguably both a strength for conceptualising of the past, and yet also a significant weakness in terms of historical representation. Thus, as Shaw argues, 'Whether game makers seek to be "truthful" or not, whether this is a work of fiction or not, we must always be sensitive to *how* they tell the history they do. This also gives us insight into who this history has been constructed for.'[62]

Telling in this regard is the fact that most of the protagonists of Rockstar's chosen style of historical games have been white men. This is both a product of and perpetuates a wider game culture that has been categorised as 'particularly masculine, heterosexual and white', with video games as a medium arguably 'the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms.'[63] This industrial composition and culture should be considered as a crucial context for the way that history has been represented in games, Rockstar's included.

The immediacy of these issues comes into focus when discussing the strategies by which Rockstar engage with potential players and manage their expectations. The purpose here is to explore the company and its brand identity's specific agenda for American history, and to trace the extent to which these issues are as much present in the paratextual surround of specific games, as a particular game itself. As noted, this is complicated by their reliance on pre-existing visions of what these periods looked, or were, like. In a 2011 interview around the time of *LAN's* release, Dan Houser discussed Rockstar's intentions for both *RDR* and *LAN*. Deliberate emphasis is placed on their decision to make games that felt like 'classic' entries in Western and *noir* canons, in the

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[61] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 47.
[62] Emphasis in original text. Shaw, 'The Tyranny of Realism', 7; Citing Elliott and Kapell, 'Introduction'.
[63] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6; See also Janine Fron et al., 'The Hegemony of Play', in *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference* (DiGRA, Tampere, Finland, 2007), 1–10.

same way that genre films such as *True Grit* (2010) and *Chinatown* (1974) were financially successful long after Westerns were declared 'dead', or well past the so-called 'classic' period of *film noir*.[64] Certainly, how would Rockstar have made a video game about the American Frontier or post-war Los Angeles without the precedents set by classic Westerns or *film noirs*, or successive Hollywood attempts at creating postmodern Westerns and neo-*noirs*? Yet, the more immediate question might actually be: *would* Rockstar have made a game about the American West or post-war Los Angeles without these histories having already been an intrinsic part of American cultural history?

In this sense, Rockstar's brand performance and genre work might be productively read through the lens of Justin Wyatt's study of 'High Concept' in film marketing practices. [65] A strong image of brand or franchise identity targets specific audiences of Rockstar fans and signals to them that these games are following in a tradition of what Rockstar games have always offered. Otherwise, the genres are presold commodities that might attract a more general audience seeking what 'Westerns' and/or '*noir*' are seen to typify. The games therefore have 'numerous' and 'strong' hooks, and broad archetypical narratives and characters that can be summed up in a relatively-short 'pitch', thereby increasing their marketability.[66] Rockstar perform a kind of '*procedural adaptation*', [67] taking specifically selected pre-sold conventions of the Western and *noir* and using them as the basis for game worlds and gameplay elements. Considering which elements of these genres are selected – and indeed, which of these are explicitly promoted as 'historical' in marketing discourse – suggests which elements of these periods still have currency when retelling American history by way of American cinema. As will be shown, the marketing of these titles only further eschews nuance, avoids disrupting hegemonic cultural and historiographical narratives, and ultimately seeks to suggest these games represent a kind of objective, unproblematic 'truth'.

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[64] John Gaudiosi, 'Rockstar Games' Dan Houser on "L.A. Noire's" Selection by the Tribeca Film Festival', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4 May 2011, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/rockstar-games-dan-houser-la-174859 [accessed 10 May 2016].
[65] Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994).
[66] The core components of 'High Concept' for the movie industry as outlined in ibid, 1–13.
[67] Matthew Weise, 'The Rules of Horror: Procedural Adaptation in *Clock Tower*, *Resident Evil* and *Dead Rising*,' in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, 2009), 238–66.

Rationale

Though academic consideration of Rockstar, and especially *GTA*, is reasonably commonplace within game studies,[68] work on *RDR* and *LAN* is largely confined to individual articles or chapters, from a player, adaptation, or literature studies perspective, and chiefly to study masculinity.[69] The games are also used as case studies in wider explorations of the relationship between American history, culture and games,[70] the role of nostalgia in contemporary media culture,[71] realism and violence in video games and other fictions,[72] or formulating a framework for analysing historical video games.[73] None of these works offers protracted analysis of the titles' historical content, consider the role of Rockstar's brand in creating them, or identifies the games' paratextual surround as a site of potential historical meaning-making.

As noted above, though an analysis of Rockstar Games specifically, this study seeks not only to evaluate the games in their own right, but also to look at the historical narratives created in and by the discourses surrounding them. This has broader implications for both historical game studies and game studies generally. By considering the way the medium interacts with and represents the past, we should also look to promotional materials as vital sources of study. These materials are indicators of game developers' historiographical engagements, and potential sites of meaning-making for

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[68] Rockstar and *GTA* are used case studies in their own right or as examples that support wider arguments about video games. See as select, representative examples: Nate Garrelts, 'An Introduction to Grand Theft Auto Studies', in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 1–15; Bonnie Ruberg, 'Representing Sex Workers in Video Games: Feminisms, Fantasies of Exceptionalism, and the Value of Erotic Labor', *Feminist Media Studies*, 21 June 2018, 1–18; Ian Bogost, 'Videogames and Ideological Frames', *Popular Communication* 4, no. 3 (2006): 165–83; Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003); Soraya Murray on the other hand uses *Max Payne 3* (2013) in her explorations of how video games remediate urban space. Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018); For postcolonial perspectives on the franchise, see Steffen Krüger, 'Facing Fanon: Examining Neocolonial Aspects in *Grand Theft Auto V* through the Prism of the Machinima Film Finding Fanon II', *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2018).

[69] Benjamin J. Triana, 'Red Dead Masculinity: Constructing a Conceptual Framework for Analyzing the Narrative and Message Found in Video Games,' *Journal of Games Criticism* 2, no. 2 (2015): 1–25; Jason W. Buel, 'Playing (with) the Western: Classical Hollywood Genres in Modern Video Games,' in *Game On, Hollywood! Essays on the Intersection of Video Games and Cinema*, ed. Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 47–57; Sara Humphreys, 'Rejuvenating "Eternal Inequality" on the Digital Frontiers of *Red Dead Redemption*,' *Western American Literature* 47, no. 2 (2012): 200–215.

[70] John Wills, *Gamer Nation* (Batlimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming).

[71] Ryan Lizardi, *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media* (London and New York: Lexington Books, 2015).

[72] Timothy J. Welsh, *Mixed Realism: Videogames and the Violence of Fiction* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[73] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*; Dawn Spring, 'Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship', *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (3 April 2015): 207–21.

players beyond their experience of the games. It is intended as the foundation to broader arguments in favour of studying 'official communication'[74] in tandem with textual analysis when critiquing the historical work that games do.

Rockstar are an exemplary company for such a case study of the consequences of branding and promotion on the representation of history in video games for a number of reasons. Firstly, with few exceptions, Rockstar's games are developed in-house.[75] They are one of few major companies that are inextricably associated with the games they develop and release. The Rockstar brand is part of the identity of their individual intellectual property franchises – brands in themselves – and vice versa. Secondly, the marketing of them is tightly controlled and managed, confined within official Rockstar channels (websites and social media, for example), certain third-party news outlets, or the official communication Take-Two, who manage corporate communication.[76]

The intention, however, is not to explore such questions from a gate-keeping perspective – as if to say that developers should not create video games that are in some way historical. Rather, this thesis explores who gets to write these (hi)stories, from what perspective they are told, what gets included, how they are framed and sold via discourses of authenticity specifically designed to surround them. It interrogates how authorship and ownership of America's past is communicated via ancillary materials. In doing so, it supposes that we might better see these games in their broader networks of historical popular culture and historiography – to explore how they feed off and depend upon a past that is already interpreted and represented, while making history themselves. As will be seen, it is Rockstar themselves who act as gatekeepers of historical knowledge – of what America was like 'in the past', and the way it has been (re)mediated by 'Americana'.

Methodology

Methodologically speaking, this study will explore Rockstar's promotional discourses, and subsequently use these discourses to frame close textual analysis. In doing so, it will consider the ways in which these games are in dialogue with wider academic and popular

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[74] Jan Švelch, '"Footage Not Representative": Redefining Paratextuality for the Analysis of Official Communication in the Video Game Industry', in *Contemporary Research on Intertextuality in Video Games*, ed. Christophe Duret and Christian-Marie Pons (Hershey, PA: IG Global, 2016), 297–315.

[75] These exceptions are *Max Payne* (2001) and *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* (2003), developed by Remedy; Team Bondi as *LA*N's co-developer; and *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), which was an IP acquired from Angel Studios (now Rockstar San Diego) and Capcom. However, all were (or have since been) published by Rockstar.

[76] That is, publish press releases, corporate and financial information, reports to shareholders, and so on.

discourses on American history. Historical research, at its most traditional, is rooted in the location and interpretation of archival sources. Consideration is given to their provenance, archival positioning and preservation, as well as their meaning in and of themselves, and as part of wider historiographical understandings. In this case however, formalised, physical archives do not (perhaps could not) exist. Yet this project is, in principle, a similar undertaking. The materials collated are archived by either Rockstar or media sites' own online repositories of their past, albeit haphazardly. These sources will be interpreted in terms of their provenance, position, and reasons for preservation, which all underpin their utility – as historiographical sources intended to tell readers about the past, and how the authors interpret American history. These sources, it is argued, are key to understanding Rockstar's process of 'doing history'. They may also be fundamental to wider understanding of how developers more broadly write histories in and through video games, and actively embody the role of developer-historian while doing so.

For the sake of limiting the amount of source material collated and surveyed – and moreover, delimiting this to an industry-focussed, rather than player-focussed study[77] – this thesis does not provide an exhaustive look at every piece of published material about Rockstar. Rather, it is a representative look at how the Rockstar's brand is presented to fans and potential players: either directly, or via entertainment news outlets as conduits through which Rockstar promotes both their games and themselves.[78] On the one hand, sources are collected from the official Rockstar website. In addition to the more traditional promotional practices undertaken to market titles (trailers, posters and developer interviews, for example), Rockstar-curated content such as blog posts hosted on the *Newswire* portion of this website offers potential players access to deeper meanings and brand quality. Otherwise, what has been collated and analysed are the controlled

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[77] Studies of player interactions within and outside of video games are abundant, and explore in greater detail many of the themes this thesis will touch on. See for example Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*; Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, eds., *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2008); T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2006); Specific to historical video games, see Copplestone, 'But That's Not Accurate: The Differing Perceptions of Accuracy in Cultural-Heritage Videogames between Creators, Consumers and Critics'; Kevin O'Neill and Bill Feenstra, '"Honestly, I Would Stick with the Books": Young Adults' Ideas About a Videogame as a Source of Historical Knowledge', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016).

[78] The necessity of using only publicly-available materials is due to the heightened secrecy with which mainstream, 'AAA' developers like Rockstar operate their business and development. Researchers are rarely allowed 'behind-the-scenes' access to the actual processes by which development decisions and actions are made and taken, while former employers are often prevented from speaking out due to Non-Disclosure Agreements. Indeed, requests to interview representatives of Rockstar made during the course of the present PhD study (unsurprisingly) went unanswered. An example of ethnographic work into video game development (which also explores these issues) is Casey O'Donnell, *Developer's Dilemma: The Secret World of Videogame Creators* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2014).

instances of access that significant Rockstar representatives give to certain news outlets around the release of their titles. This thesis will consider what this official communication represents, and how it tries to shape expectations while maintaining control of potential meaning.

This focus filters the wealth of general, widespread public discourse on Rockstar and their games by looking at when and where they deliberately present themselves to the press and potential consumers, specifically within the context of their games' release (or re-release). While some reviews or articles that look at the games individually (or the company as a whole) will be incorporated where relevant or representative, generally this survey of ancillary materials is limited to where notable representatives of the company are interviewed, or otherwise cited or quoted, in features preceding or coinciding with the release of *RDR* and *LAN* (mainly 2009-2011). As a result, it studies when and how Rockstar choose to communicate to fans via the media, and through what major publications they choose to do so.[79] Certain key questions ask how, for example, is Rockstar's role as mediator of American history, and thus as historian, articulated in these discursive sites? How is the past and historical knowledge commodified in the promotion of historical games? What is the relationship between these games' textual and paratextual representation of the past?

Research methods such as this present similar issues in the critique of historical archival work more broadly. Studying these materials at least five, if not nearly ten years removed from their creation and publication might, it can be posited, prevent (or at least hamper) us from commenting on the actual meanings of these materials for those who actually consumed them at the time. It is compounded further by the fact that actual fan engagements with them (for example, comments on blog posts) have since been lost, actively deleted, or links have rotted.[80] However, I argue that it is still possible to comment on the kind of 'horizon of expectation'[81] Rockstar attempted to create: what this

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[79] Predominantly, this encompasses features given exclusively to publications like *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* in the UK, and more globally gaming and media entertainment outlets like *IGN* and *Gamespot*, and trade publications such as *The Hollywood Reporter*. For the most part, these are publications that are either explicitly game-focussed, or have been open to covering and commenting on video games as a cultural form.

[80] These kinds of issues around the collection and interpretation of ephemeral materials are explored, for example, in Jonathan Gray, 'The Politics of Paratextual Ephemeralia', in *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media: Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts*, ed. Sara Pesce and Paolo Noto (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 32–44; See also Švelch, 'Footage Not Representative'.

[81] This term, from Reception Theory, is applied to video game pre-release materials by Steve Jones in Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

paratextual 'field', in Gerard Genette's original conception of the term,[82] broadly consists of, and what image it appears the company attempted to construct, whether received as such or not.[83] Moreover, in using the terms 'text' and 'paratext', this thesis does so conscious of the potential discursive consequences. The term paratext, as Barker notes, has become fluid, if not outright haphazard in its usage among media scholars.[84] The usage of the terms and their suitability in application to studying games is outlined in chapter two, but broadly, this thesis uses them to distinguish between the two realms of content and sites of potential meaning-making studied.

Moreover, this study is not intended to preclude the possibilities for player agency, or indeed, resistance to the messages Rockstar circulate. But these are sources of information created and placed *intentionally* for players to seek out and consume. Aspects of Rockstar's promotional discourses are often picked up and commented on by reviewers, who also act in the capacity to guide players toward certain meanings.[85] They may also be acknowledged and recorded by fans in online repositories of information like fan wikis. That is, released in broader media landscape of 'convergence' and 'forensic fandom' practices,[86] fans and critics use reviews, wikis and other online platforms to collect and collate everything that game developers put into games, and outside of them, that could possibly be uncovered. Tracing the contours of industrial self-expression then, rather than accounting for how or if players understand these expressions, this thesis tries to build as wide as possible a picture of what it means for a game developer to perform the role of developer-historian, and the ramifications of this for our understanding of the way games engage with and represent the past. It asks what these promotional discourses tell potential consumers and scholars about Rockstar's vision of history, and how Rockstar sees both their products and their engagements with America's past? How does Rockstar attempt to manage player expectations of their games' representation of American history? What is at stake when so much emphasis is placed on promoting that

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[82] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[83] Realistically, this something we can never truly know one way or another.
[84] Barker, 'Speaking of "Paratexts": A Theoretical Revisitation'.
[85] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).
[86] Henry Jenkins argues that 'convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encourages to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content'. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3; While Jason Mittell coined the term 'forensic fandom' in relation to television audiences, it has also been tentatively applied to fans of certain 'cult' video game franchises, and how they navigate transmedia paratextual proliferations in pursuit of story information. See Jason Mittell, 'Playing for Plot in the *Lost* and *Portal* Franchises', *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 6, no. 1 (2012), 5-13.

they offer access to 'authentic'-seeming worlds and interactive representations of the past?

Thesis Overview

As a result of the necessarily ad-hoc interdisciplinary requirements of this thesis' methodology – there being no stable 'archive' from which to collect material, nor solid pre-existing framework for analysing it – each individual chapter is prefaced with a discussion of the academic literature relevant to that section, and the research questions necessary to interrogate it. Chapter one examines how the Rockstar brand manifests in popular discourse surrounding the company, and those generated by the company itself. It reflects upon the main perceptible values of the brand, in particular analysing Rockstar's 'outsider' or anti-authority identity, and how the company cultivates a reputation for making 'open world' games, preoccupied with white masculinity, which have a particular referential relationship with 'Americana'. In doing so, I also examine the way this identity has been validated by game critics and academics.

Continually foregrounded as texts that 'Rockstar Games Present', this branding discourse creates an image of Rockstar as developer-historian. It therefore lends the company not only a particular sort of brand association with inherent qualities – cultural, historical, or otherwise – but also commodifies a specific vision for consumption: one that is consistently doing very specific things with American history. This particular set of values goes beyond just a corporate recycling of game types repackaged onto different 'skins' of varying time periods and locales,[87] but controls and disseminates a more personal ideological association with an 'authored' text, with values, a message, and meaning. This appears important for the deployment of a promotional discourse that Rockstar employs, which tries to encourage consumers to read or view their titles in a highly specific way. By attributing a kind of 'promotional authorship'[88] to Rockstar as a whole – subsuming under this banner all the individual creatives who contribute to the game's development (writers, art and technical directors, executive producers, and so on) – a particular identity has been cultivated that is seen to represent a 'collective psyche'

[87] An argument put forward by Lizardi, *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media.*
[88] Leora Hadas, 'A New Vision: J. J. Abrams, *Star Trek*, and Promotional Authorship', *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (2017): 46–66.

versed in pop-culture and social observation.[89] Rockstar's public face therefore acts in a discursive capacity, mediating between company and player, attempting to confer preferred or enhanced ways of consuming their video games and understanding their meanings.[90]

How Rockstar perform the role of developer-historian will be consistently addressed throughout the thesis, as it becomes apparent that various paratexts are sites at which developers of historical games assert their authority and legitimacy in creating historical representations. This chapter especially posits questions about how the requirements of a brand – be it of a specific game franchise or developer – affect and constrain the type of historical representation present in the game itself. Moreover, how is this supported, authenticated, and legitimised by the promotional discourses that accompany its release?

Chapter two engages with promotional media scholarship to begin considering how Rockstar sought to generate *discourses of authenticity* preceding the release of *RDR* and *LAN*. It traces how the company attempted to guide player entry into these games, and the reception of them as legitimate and authentic historical media products. It begins by surveying the way that Rockstar-authored paratexts attempted to generate a *discourse of historical authenticity* around the release of these titles. Here, it becomes clear that Rockstar's marketing strategies can be contextualised within wider trends identified by promotional media scholars, wherein there is an increasingly blurred line between what was once considered 'promotion' and 'content'.[91] Moreover, this is the first of many sites at which Rockstar explicitly *perform* the role of developer-historian, lending authority to their interpretation and creation of historical game narratives and spaces. Unpacking the ways in which Rockstar sought to historically authenticate these titles, we begin to see slippage between evocations of the representation of an actual American past, and the remediation of American history already established in wider media. It becomes apparent that seeking legitimation for their historical representation is highly dependent on a presumed audience familiarity with depictions of the past established in cinema.

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[89] Matt Hill, '*Grand Theft Auto V*: Meet Dan Houser, Architect of a Gaming Phenomenon', *The Guardian*, 7 September 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/07/grand-theft-auto-dan-houser [accessed 7 June 2018].

[90] The brand appears therefore to act as a kind of 'boundary' which 'polices' meaning; holding the authority to delimit both 'interpretative agency' and the kinds of representations the company intend to convey. For arguments on the way branding can be a 'policing' force, see Melissa Aronczyk, 'Portal or Police? The Limits of Promotional Paratexts,' *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (March 15, 2017): 111–19.

[91] Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

Chapter three then moves directly to explore how Rockstar worked to generate a *discourse of cinematic authenticity* around the release of *RDR* and *LAN*.[92] Borrowing from and capitalising on the prestige and currency of genre cinema, Rockstar use deliberately-selected examples of canonical genres intrinsically associated with American cultural identity – the Western and *noir* – to promote the authentic qualities of their games. To do so, Rockstar create a particular marketable illusion of what the most representative or pervasive qualities of these genres are, reordering film history in a way that suits their brand identity, and the branding of their games. As such, it appears as though they are actively performing the same kind of 'genre cleansing' practices that seemed to be at work in wider academic film criticism, and popular, canonical perceptions of film history more generally.[93] These paratexts also serve as the components of Rockstar's appraisal of American cultural history, and therefore, embody their own historiographical work.

This chapter ultimately allows for reflection on the blurring between representations of American history, and representations of the America past *by way of* film history. Under the guise of 'nostalgia', these promotional discourses encourage the very kind of cultural 'schizophrenia' that theorists such as Fredric Jameson claimed,[94] by positioning players in relation to a highly specific selection of cultural artifacts; that is, certain films that privilege a particularised view of the Western and *noir*. Drawn from different periods in film history, and thus devoid of their particular historicity, they reorder the long, complex, often contradictory or contested histories of these cinematic genres, styles, or forms into a new consumable canon that verifies the selective presentation of history that Rockstar have created through *RDR* and *LAN*. Thus, both players and these games' presentation of history are located *outside* of history, following the role of culture in late capitalism first noted by Jameson. Players are encouraged to look back nostalgically at games underpinned by stereotype and an overarching sense of narrative certainty, constructed specifically via paratextual discourses that map out for players what is the 'right' way to view these products (and their historicity).

Paul Grainge offers the counterpoint that the uses of nostalgia may not purely be a Jamesonian cause for concern about the loss of historicity; rather, it more likely reflects

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[92] Work from this chapter was published as an article, Esther Wright, 'Marketing Authenticity: Rockstar Games and the Use of Cinema in Video Games Promotion', *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2017): 131–64.

[93] J.E. Smyth, 'The Western That Got Its Content "From Elsewhere": High Noon, Fred Zinnemann, and Genre Cleansing', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no. 1 (2014): 42–55.

[94] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991).

the impact of niche marketing practices in the entertainment business.[95] Rockstar certainly cater to a particular target market: the adult market, and order the whole expectation of 'realism' around it, using certain cultural references to do so. Certain critical appraisals of Rockstar and their process feed into and reinforce both their game-making and target audiences as resolutely young adult to middle-aged men.[96] But this demographic is hardly 'niche': video game advertising, since the 1990s at least, has sought to target men (of all ages), not women, under the presumption that it was men who both created and subsequently played games.[97]

The selectivity of these intertextual reference points has a measurable impact on the textual representation of history found within the games. Chapters four and five develop analysis of Rockstar's promotional discourses by considering how they interact with *RDR* and *LAN*'s '*history-play-space[s]*'.[98] Chapter four discusses the marketing of gameplay features in 'gameplay trailers', press interviews and 'behind-the-scenes' exclusives that feature comment from executives. There appears to be an attempt at creating a discourse of historical authenticity around the game world itself: suggesting that it is implicitly authentic or faithful to a real past world. Much like the way individual narrative or character elements are portrayed as inherently authentic, this is done to suggest a symbiotic relationship between historical authenticity in the game world, and what players can do within it. This is further affirmed by gameplay videos that legitimised certain themes and possibilities for action according to how authentic they were. Yet these gameplay options are perceptibly drawn from a limited idea of what these periods consisted of, and what 'action' within them looked like. This is, it is argued, a direct result of both the demands of Rockstar's brand values and identity, and the way they games were marketed via a very narrow view of cultural history and American history more generally, as noted in previous chapters. While offering open worlds that seem to suggest player freedom to move through them, players are explicitly limited in terms of who they can be and what they can do.

Chapter five takes up these issues of selectivity and marginalisation and explores them in relation to game narratives and gender representation. Considering women's

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[95] Paul Grainge, 'Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes, and Media Recycling', *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 23, no. 1 (2000): 32.
[96] For example, the unauthorised book (publicly derided by Rockstar) published by David Kushner, *Jacked: The Unauthorised Behind-The-Scenes Story of Grand Theft Auto* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012).
[97] Tracey Lien, 'No Girls Allowed', *Polygon*, 2 December 2013, https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed [accessed 7 February 2017].
[98] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

histories as one of several prominent areas of narrative marginalisation, it again uses promotional materials to frame discussion of how Rockstar perform the role of developer-historian. Moreover, the politics underlying these paratextual discourses of authenticity can be read in terms of the way Rockstar attempted to engineer popular perceptions of history to legitimise textual representations of the past. In both cases, the trappings of genre cinema, and the Rockstar brand's parasitic relationship to it, allows us to draw a direct line of causality from the rigid adherence to brand identity perceptible in marketing, to the creation of historical narratives and game worlds.

The structure of this thesis is therefore designed to bring together and deal with, in turn, various strands of interdisciplinary thought, ultimately creating a certain logic which sees each new chapter build on what has been explored previously. As a starting point however, the following chapter overviews the games themselves: their development context, narratives, affordances, and major themes.

Chapter 0.5: Game Overviews

Red Dead Redemption (2010)

A departure from Rockstar's previous Western-themed title, *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), *RDR* was released in 2010 to widespread critical and fan acclaim. This has persisted ever since, making it one of Rockstar's most beloved games.[1] It sold at least 14 million copies worldwide,[2] won several notable gaming awards in the year it was released, and received a 'Game of the Year' edition.[3] Moreover, while there is a reasonably rich history of games employing the Western as theme or setting,[4] *RDR* was, until the release of *RDR2*, arguably the Western video game with the most cultural cachet. It has widely been considered one of the best games of all time, and consistently features in rankings to this effect.[5]

From the outset, *RDR*'s promotion foregrounded that it offered a Rockstar-authored 'vision' of America's Frontier. A Take-Two press release quoted Sam Houser: "'We wanted to bring our vision of the American West to life […] we tried to make players actually feel like they are an outlaw living in the last days of the Wild West.'"[6] What vision underpins the sense of authenticity Rockstar claim and sell? *RDR*'s single-player mode[7] casts John Marston as playable-protagonist for the majority of the game. A former member of an outlaw gang, now settled with a wife and son, Marston reluctantly

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[1] These journalistic affirmations extend to, for example, the enjoyability of playing John Marston as a character, and even the game's creation of historical atmosphere. Mike Diver, 'Damn, It Feels Good To Be John Marston Again', *Vice*, 25 July 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/xdmx8j/damn-it-feels-good-being-john-marston-again-red-dead-redemption-xbox-855 [accessed 25 July 2016]; Holly Nielsen, 'How *Red Dead Redemption* Is a Masterclass in Creating Historical Atmosphere', *The Telegraph*, 28 September 2017, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gaming/features/red-dead-redemption-masterclass-creating-historical-atmosphere/ [accessed 29 September 2017].

[2] See Eddie Makuch, '*Red Dead Redemption* Reaches 14 Million Copies Shipped', *Gamespot,* 20 August 2015, http://www.gamespot.com/articles/red-dead-redemption-reaches-14-million-copies-ship/1100-6429928/ [accessed 20 November 2015]. The article also explores the fact that there is also increasing support and pressure from fans for Rockstar to make the game playable on current generation consoles (PlayStation 4 and Xbox One).

[3] 'Red Dead Redemption: Game of the Year Edition Coming This October for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3', *Rockstar Newswire*, 13 September 2011, https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/18831/red-dead-redemption-game-of-the-year-edition-coming-this-october.html [accessed 28 August 2018].

[4] For overview see Wills, 'Pixel Cowboys and Silicon Gold Mines'.

[5] For example, it features as number 5 of 100 in *GamesRadar's* '100 best games ever', 3 places higher than *GTAV,* despite being four years older, (GamesRadar Staff, 'The 100 best games ever', 25 February 2015, *gamesradar,* http://www.gamesradar.com/best-games-ever/[accessed 25 October 2015]); 3 out of 100 according to IGNUK: 'Top 100 Modern Games', *IGNUK,* http://www.ign.com/top/modern-games/3 [accessed 25 October 2015]. See also Keith Stuart, '*Red Dead Redemption*: the best video game ever?', 9 May 2010, *The Guardian,* http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/may/09/red-dead-redemption [accessed 25 October 2015].

[6] Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games Announces Red Dead Redemption for Xbox 360(R) and PlayStation(R)3', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc*, 18 May 2010, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1428269 [accessed 27 August 2018].

[7] While there are single-player and online-multiplayer modes to *RDR*, this thesis is concerned with the former's Rockstar-designed narrative and gameplay.

returns to his 'old' life of violence after being strong-armed by underhanded government agents. Holding his family ransom, they force Marston (/the player) to track down, capture or kill his former associates, with the help of a variety of Westerners: ranchers, a beleaguered Sheriff and his deputies, drunks, psychotic necrophiles, snake-oil merchants, disgraced anthropologists, military dictators and revolutionaries.

The game is set in 1911 and concludes some time in 1914. As in *GTA*, *RDR*'s world is a hybrid of real and fictionalised versions of the Southwestern U.S./Mexico border. Comprising three unlockable territories – New Austin (a backwater), Nuevo Paraiso (a northern Mexican province in the grip of civil war) and the increasingly 'refined' West Elizabeth – the player's entry into these territories is controlled by how many of the game's five 'acts' (and their corresponding missions branches) have been completed. The first act begins with the opening cutscene, and tracks Marston's/the player's introduction to and association with several major characters across the area of the game map identified as New Austin: Bill Williamson, Marston's former associate who he must apprehend; Bonnie MacFarlane, who runs MacFarlane's ranch with the help of her father Drew, and whose missions provide the basic training for the player at the beginning of the game; Marshall Johnson, based out of the small town of Armadillo, struggling to keep the peace with the help of his deputies; Nigel West Dickens, a traveling salesman who sells 'elixirs' supposedly based on 'Eastern scientific research'; Seth, an oddball graverobber; and Irish, a drunk who reluctantly offers his (usually unhelpful) assistance. These overwhelmingly male non-playable characters (NPCs) assist Marston in attacking Williamson's Fort Mercer hideout, the first act's denouement.

The second section of the game begins when Marston travels to Nuevo Paraiso, after Williamson escapes across the border and joins up with another former associate, Javier Escuella. The player's introductory missions in this part of the game world are led by Landon Ricketts, a legendary former outlaw living out the rest of his days in Mexico – there being no place for him in the increasingly-'new' West. Here Marston/the player becomes embroiled in a reimagining of the Mexican civil war. Marston exploits figures on both sides of conflict along the way: military dictator Coronel Allende and his subordinate Captain Vincente De Santa, and opposing 'Freedom Fighters' Luisa Fortuna (a member of the resistance movement) and Abraham Reyes (the 'leader' of the resistance). After this section, both Williamson and Escuella are either apprehended or killed, depending on the player's decision, and the military regime is overturned.

Completion of this act opens up the player's access to West Elizabeth, bringing Marston to the city of Blackwater expecting to get his family back. But Agents Edgar Ross and Archer Fordham set him another task: track down and kill former gang-leader Dutch Van Der Linde. To do so, Marston/the player is assisted by Harold McDougal, a disgraced, drug-addicted, former Yale 'anthropologist', and Nastas, a Native American turned government informant, who is trying to save young indigenous men who have joined Dutch's new gang. When Dutch is dead, Marston is allowed to return to his ranch at Beecher's Hope. Reunited with his family Marston sets about restoring the ranch, hoping to put his past behind him and create an honest life for his family. The player revisits the MacFarlanes to buy cattle and assist them with crop harvests, carries out the relatively-mundane tasks of ranch work for Marston's wife Abigail, and teaches his son Jack to hunt. Ultimately, federal agents come after Marston and kill him, though Abigail and Jack manage to escape. Following the 'end' of Marston Sr.'s story, an open-ended section of the game begins. The player takes control of grown-up Jack Marston three years after the death of his father. Along with optional missions, a final mission unique to Jack's story can be completed. Considered the official, 'final' story mission, 'Remember My Family' sees the player/Jack take revenge on Edgar Ross, the man who killed his father.

This story unfolds by way of individual missions, wherein players must use various gameplay actions – largely based around violence and gunplay – to progress. *RDR*'s story is substantially driven via cutscenes – a 'cinematic' device used by most video games to establish 'characters and scenario', introduce plot elements and objectives, provide context and justification for gameplay actions, and reward player success.[8] Like most Rockstar games, in *RDR* cutscenes introduce individual missions to players, defining the actions necessary to achieve its objectives and progress. Fundamental to the structure of the game, cutscenes help convey Rockstar's predetermined story and control the player's movements through their Western world. They connect the meaning of various, otherwise repetitive actions and objectives – to ride out to kill a gang, capture a

[8] These short filmic segments have appeared in video games from relatively early in their history, and 'exploded' both in sophistication and prevalence after the shift in technology to CD-ROM. They became a way to sell games through TV advertising, showing off 'flashy', polished parts of the game. See Ed Vollans, '"The Most Cinematic Game yet"', *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2017); Their function now extends well beyond this, as a means of both narrative production and player engagement and 'reward'. See Sacha A. Howells, 'Watching a Game, Playing a Movie: When Media Collide', in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, ed. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 110–14; Rune Klevjer, 'Cut-Scenes', in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 301–10.

bounty target, break horses, kill wild animals, herd cattle, drive a stagecoach, and so on – to the advancement of the overarching narrative.

That is, *RDR* affords a wide variety of archetypically 'Western' gameplay actions from which players may create their own emergent narrative. For example, players may use a variety of period weaponry to duel other men, hunt animals – or perhaps terrorise Frontier towns. A shifting spectrum of 'honor' points changes reactively depending on what side of the law the player commits deeds.[9] That laws are there to be broken exemplifies an intrinsic part of Rockstar's wider brand: gaining a 'WANTED' level by committing misdeeds (after which a bounty is placed on the player's head) is a significant gameplay mechanic in itself, as in the *GTA* series. These affordances, along with *RDR*'s story, exemplify long-held Western conventions, particularly the 'ambiguous relationship to the law' that the archetypical Western hero-figure often inhabits. It is that which John Cawelti reads as so 'embod[ying], among other things, a traditional American notion of individualism' – that laws are simply organising rules that select few heroic figures can bend to their will, in pursuit of a 'true justice' the law can never hope to offer.[10]

Otherwise, players can locate treasure maps and use them to retrieve hidden stashes, or collect plants for various achievements. They can frequent saloons or play poker. They may visit stores to purchase supplies, buy newspapers whose content reflects a player's relative progression through the game and its historical context, or visit two different churches which charge a fee to watch tongue-in-cheek silent films specifically created for the game. Perhaps players can choose to do nothing at all, electing instead to ride around the large open spaces of the map on horseback, watching the weather or time of day change. If their only desire is to experience this visually rich 'Western' world, the game only prevents them doing so insofar as certain spaces of the game only become available after the completion of certain narrative milestones. However, what players *choose* to do is not the focus of this thesis. Rather, it considers how the overall 'narrative architecture' of the game,[11] and its constituent components, were sold to players as authentic.

At this point, it is worth briefly sketching the contours of how 'the West' and its history have been previously defined in historical projects. Scholars have long declared

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[9] That is, the game has rigidly-defined rules as to what actions constitute lawful and unlawful activity.
[10] John G. Cawelti, 'The Gunfighter and the Hard-Boiled Dick: Some Ruminations on American Fantasies of Heroism', *American Studies* 16, no. 2 (1975): 50.
[11] Henry Jenkins, 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture', In *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 124-130.

that ideas of 'the West', and the Western genre itself, are fundamental to America's historical imagination and development, as well as its culture, society and politics.[12] Usually bedecked with inverted commas, it is also often claimed the 'real' of America's Western history can never be extricated from its twin, 'the artful distortions of the popular imagination.'[13] As central to the American experience from childhood onwards, it is presumed that the Western's conventions and historical referents are ingrained parts of the imagination of audience within and outside America.[14]

Dating from Frederick Jackson Turner's address to the American Historical Association in 1893[15] – the oft-cited origin point for the symbiotic relationship between 'the Frontier' (or the much-maligned 'F-word'[16]) and American history – the general thrust of historiography defined experience of the American West in white male terms, and the Frontier as the meeting point of 'civilisation' and 'savagery'.[17] Western land was often characterised as female by generations of male writers and historians,[18] with the beautiful, virgin space open for masculine conquest.[19] Throughout the twentieth century, scores of cultural historians and film scholars defined hypermasculinity and male violence as cornerstones of the Western,[20] with Richard Slotkin's trilogy on the white man's West

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[12] See for example Arthur Redding, '"Built Ford Tough": The "Sincerity" of John Ford and the Persistence of the American Western', in Scott F. Stoddart, ed., *The New Western: Critical Essays on the Genre since 9/11* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016), 10-18; J. Hoberman, 'How The West Was Lost', in Jim Kitses & Gregg Rickman, eds., *The Western Reader* (New York; Limelight Editions, 1998), 85-92; Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. LTD., 1998); Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson, 'Introduction', in Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson, eds., *Back In The Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 1-7.

[13] Ann Fabian, 'History for the Masses: Commercialising the Western Past', in William Cronon, George Miles and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under the Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 223-238, p. 226. See also Jim Kitses, 'Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western' (1969), in Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, eds., *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 57-68;

[14] James R. Grossman, 'Introduction', in James R. Grossman. ed., *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994-January 7, 1995* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994) 1-5.

[15] Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (American Historical Association, Chicago, IL, 1893), 197–227, https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-significance-of-the-frontier-in-american-history.

[16] Patricia Nelson Limerick, 'The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century', in James R. Grossman, ed., *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994-January 7, 1995* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 67-102.

[17] Also implicated in the violent masculinisation of the Frontier was Theodore Roosevelt, and his work *The Winning of the West* (1889-1894).

[18] Annette Koldony, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor As Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

[19] Leslie A. Fielder, *The Return of the Vanishing America* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968).

[20] See for example Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*; John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1970); Lee Clark Mitchell, 'Violence in the Film Westerns', in J. David Slocum, ed., *Violence and American Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 176-191; Mary Lea

(1973-1992) the apex of this historiographical school.[21] Recent perspectives have argued that the 'new' West of California often stands in contrast to the 'Old West', creating imaginary spaces such as Disneyland's Frontierland symbolising a 'neo-frontier' that commodifies 'historical frontier markers', stripping it to reductive components and selling it back to America and the world.[22]

However, defining the Western and its historical foundations with such a narrow orientation overshadows the diversity of actors on both the historical *and* cultural stage, condensing a multitude of popular narratives (and historical realities) into one supposed cultural fixation. Around the same time that Slotkin declared the Frontier a space for 'regeneration through violence', historians began to interrogate the history of 'the history of the West', and the legacy of Turner's 'Frontier Thesis' in conceptualising American history.[23] Troubled by the overt (white) masculinisation of Western history (largely by white male academics) and amidst a changing socio-political landscape, historians between the 1960s and 1990s sought to repopulate American Western history with the stories of those long excluded – namely women, Indigenous populations, and people of colour.[24] Scholars advocating the 'New Western History' like Patricia Nelson Limerick bemoaned the fact that those emerging historical projects had 'virtually no impact' on popular perceptions of Western history, and suggested that this 'cheerful and complete indifference to the work of Frontier historians' who study *othered* Western subjects 'may, in truth, be the secret of their success'.[25]

Indeed, we are surrounded by entertainment products that privilege stories about masculine violence during American westward expansion. Television shows like *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), for all their potential for feminist readings,[26] still mostly construct their narratives around Western stereotypes and violence against women and people of

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Bandy and Kevin Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Tompkins, *West of Everything*.

[21] The trilogy culminated in Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

[22] Karen Jones and John Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 307–8.

[23] See for example Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of the Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997); Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

[24] Nash, *Creating the West*, 79.

[25] In her essay, Limerick makes these comments in relation to the presentation of a particular and composite image of the 'Frontier' in Disneyland's Frontierland section of their park, but these comments can certainly be applied more generally to the wider realm of popular recreations of 'Western' iconographies and themes. See Limerick, 'The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century', 72.

[26] Esther Wright, 'Writing "The West" In Westworld', *Esther Wright* (blog), 23 November 2016, https://estherwright.wordpress.com/2016/11/23/writing-the-west-in-westworld/ [accessed 23 November 2016].

colour.[27] Netflix's *Godless* (Netflix, 2017), while marketed as about women and set in 'No Man's Land', was founded upon the age-old story of male antagonism.[28] Films like *The Revenant* (2015) and *Slow West* (2015) win Oscars and critical acclaim, while anyone but white men are nowhere near the centre of these (hi)stories. Highly anticipated films like the Coen Brothers' *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) or the adaptation of Patrick deWitt's novel *The Sisters Brothers* (2011; 2018) are similarly white-male-dominated.[29] Meanwhile, female-centric films like *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) and *Jane Got A Gun* (2015) are confined to the margins as indie films, or outright panned. Other Oscar-winners like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) are backhandedly referred to as a 'gay cowboy project,[30] and do not comfortably make it into the canon of what makes a 'proper' western.

While Limerick's point undoubtedly stands, both her comments and the contemporary media landscape inadvertently obscure the fact that the wider Western cultural and historiographical genre long encompassed work on and by Western *others* – Native American historiography,[31] a strong presence of women in front of or behind the

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[27] S. E. Smith, 'Colonial Dreams: "*Westworld* Fetishizes Violent Bygone Eras', *Bitch Media,* 24 October 2018, https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/westworld-sells-colonial-fantasies [accessed 24 October 2018].

[28] See for example Britt Hayes, 'Netflix Wants You To Think "Godless" Is a Series About Women. It's Not.', *ScreenCrush*, 27 November 2017, https://screencrush.com/netflix-wants-you-to-think-godless-is-a-series-about-women-its-not/ [accessed 24 October 2018].

[29] Sarah Aswell, 'The Absent Women of "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs"', *Forbes*, 25 November 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarahaswell/2018/11/25/the-absent-women-of-the-ballad-of-buster-scruggs/amp/?__twitter_impression=true [accessed 25 November 2018]; Nick Martin, 'The Blinding Whiteness of the Coen Brothers' Wild West', *Splinter*, 20 November 2018, https://splinternews.com/the-blinding-whiteness-of-the-coen-brothers-wild-west-1830565330/amp?utm_medium=sharefromsite&utm_source=splinter_twitter&utm_campaign=sharebar&__twitter_impression=true [accessed 25 November 2018].

[30] Chris Gardner, '"Brokeback Mountain" Writer Reveals Actors Who Almost Starred', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4 April 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/rambling-reporter/brokeback-mountain-actors-who-turned-down-roles-film-1099361 [accessed 10 November 2018]. Chris Gardner, '"Brokeback Mountain" Writer Sets Record Straight on Joaquin Phoenix Casting', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 24 April 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/rambling-reporter/brokeback-mountain-writer-sets-record-straight-joaquin-phoenix-casting-1105136 [accessed 10 November 2018].

[31] Historical and cultural works dating back to the late nineteenth century sought to document atrocities against and experiences of Native Americans; for example, the works of Helen Hunt Jackson. See *Ramona* (New York: New York Modern Library, 2005); Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889). The growth of 'The New Indian History' began roughly in the early 1970s. See Nicholas G. Rosenthal, 'Beyond the New Indian History: Recent Trends in the Historiography on the Native Peoples of North America', *History Compass,* 4/5 (2006), 962-974. Moreover, 1974 and 1976 respectively, academic journals like *American Indian Quarterly* and *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* began publication to further a commitment to study of American Indigenous peoples and their history. For isolated works, see for example Robert Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1979); Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970)*;* Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 1982).

movie camera,[32] and the relative inclusion of minorities in early Westerns.[33] That is, the violent-masculinisation and resolutely Anglo-centric focus of Western history – envisioned by Western cultural texts – appears to be a comparatively newer phenomenon. Moreover, film critics and scholars are themselves implicated in this in the way they have undertaken a project of 'genre cleansing', largely removing non-white-male *others* from popular canon, preserving the genre as something expressive of male professionalism and interrelationships.[34] Thus, while historiography itself increasingly accounts for those long relegated to the margins, at the same time it appears these endeavours have also brought about 'a world in which history seems to be something we can cast off at will.'[35] As will be argued, the Westerns that have currency to Rockstar are those preoccupied with engaging America's history in mainly-masculine terms, offering reductive, simplified versions of always-complex issues and periods.

Putting it mildly, the West has always been a history of 'competing visions'.[36] But as Kerwin Lee Klein wrote, each historical project 'presupposes or projects a philosophy of history'.[37] This thesis interrogates Rockstar's 'philosophy': the company's attitude to history, and what has already been written about it both in traditional historiography and popular culture's own writing and rewriting of America's past.

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[32] For example, Hillary Hallett has traced the rise of early Hollywood cinema, and noted the initial prominence of female talent on both sides of the camera, including in silent westerns; notable instances which have been subject to relative historical 'erasure' in studies of the early development of this industry. See Hillary Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2013). In film criticism, a recent *Guardian* article on women in Western films drew attention to the way female stars or specific female-centric films have been historically overlooked, highlighting that 'Bona fide westerns in which female characters draw guns are still considered aberrations,' despite there being very many 'splendid ones', while evoking works such as Dee Brown's *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (1958) that 'assembled real-life accounts of actors, missionaries, barmaids, college graduates, pioneers and cross-dressers, any one of whose story would make a terrific basis for a movie'. See Anne Bilson, 'Jane Got a Gun – but most women in westerns still don't', *The Guardian,* April 21, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/21/jane-got-a-gun-most-women-in-westerns-dont.

[33] The work of John Ford is one particular example of this, especially his later Westerns. For these kinds of explorations of Ford's work, see for illustrative examples exploration of the director in Michael Valdez Moses, 'Savage Nations: Native Americans and the Western', in Jennifer L. McMahon and B. Steve Csaki, eds., *The Philosophy of the Western* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010); See also chapter by Robin Wood, Gaylyn Studlar, Charles Ramirez Berg, and Joan Dagle in Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein, eds., *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Sound Era* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001). Moreover, as early as 1931 the Hollywood film *Cimarron* – adapted from the novel by Edna Ferber – sought to offer a 'revisionist' take on the white-centric imperialism of Turner's Frontier Thesis. See J.E. Smyth, '*Cimarron*: The New Western History in 1931', *Film & History* 33, no. 1 (2003), 9-17.

[34] See Smyth, 'The Western That Got Its Content "From Elsewhere"'.

[35] Klein, *Frontiers of the Historical Imagination*, 12.

[36] Jones and Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions*.

[37] Klein, *Frontiers of the Historical Imagination*, 6.

***L.A. Noire* (2011)**

Though the timeline of *LAN*'s development and release runs parallel to that of *RDR*, it was not solely developed by Rockstar. The project originated in 2004 with Team Bondi, the now-defunct Sydney-based studio headed by Brendan McNamara.[38] Speculation claimed it was 'the biggest game development project undertaken in Australia',[39] the studio's agreement on a publishing deal with Sony as a PlayStation exclusive fell through less than two years after development began due to spiralling costs.[40] McNamara then agreed a publishing deal with Rockstar, announced in September 2006. After seven years of development, *LAN* was released on 17 May 2011 to critical acclaim and relative commercial success.[41] Some argued that the game had the potential to change the industry, not only for actors who might consider the medium a serious outlet for their performances, but also in terms of the technology developed to make *LAN*'s virtual world and characters appear so real and 'historically accurate'.[42]

Yet Team Bondi closed in late-2011, months after *LAN*'s release, in part because the studio was unable to secure a new project in time, but also given the negative press surrounding working conditions at the studio.[43] Rather than acquiring and rebranding the

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[38] McNamara had previously managed development of *The Getaway* (2002) game, a 'one-time [*GTA*] competitor', which he had written and directed while working at Sony's Team Soho in London. See Keith Stuart, '*LA Noire:* the interview', May 11, 2011, *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2011/may/11/la-noire-exclusive-interview [accessed 25 May 2016]; Tom Bramwell, 'Team Bondi's PS3 title named', *Eurogamer,* July 19, 2005, http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/news190705bondips3 [accessed 25 May 2016].

[39] Andrew McMillen, 'Why Did *L.A. Noire* Take Seven Years To Make?', *IGN*, June 24, 2011, http://uk.ign.com/articles/2011/06/24/why-did-la-noire-take-seven-years-to-make [accessed 24 May 2016].

[40] Quoted in ibid.

[41] Take-Two's annual report for the financial year following the game's release cited figures that it 'was the highest-selling new intellectual property in our industry during 2011.' See Take-Two Interactive Software, 'Annual Report 2012'. By March 31, 2012, sales were estimated to be at least 5 million copies worldwide. See Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., 'Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. Reports Financial Results for Third Quarter Fiscal 2012, *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.,* 2 February 2012, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsarticle&ID=1656159 [accessed 24 May 2016].

[42] Kev Geoghegan, 'Will L*.A. Noire* change the game for actors?', *BBC News,* May 27, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-13507355 [accessed 14 April 2016].

[43] See interview with Brendan McNamara in Welsey Yin-Poole, 'Brendan McNamara: "I'd rather people just ring me up and tell me to f*** off"', 11 November 2011, *Eurogamer,* http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2011-11-10-brendan-mcnamara-id-rather-people-just-ring-me-up-and-tell-me-to-f-off-interview [accessed 24 May 2016]; Luke Plunkett, 'Report: *LA Noire* Was Development Hell, Rockstar No Longer Working With Team Bondi', *Kotaku,* 7 May 2011, http://kotaku.com/5818019/report-la-noires-development-was-hell-rockstar-no-longer-working-with-team-bondi [accessed 24 May 2016]; See Andrew Yoon, '*LA Noire* credits missing 130, developers accuse', *Shack News,* 20 June 2011, http://www.shacknews.com/article/68972/la-noire-credits-missing-130 [accessed 24 May 2016]; Andrew McMillen, 'The Emails Behind The Whistle Blowing at Team Bondi', *games industry.biz,* 5 July 2011, http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2011-07-05-revealed-the-internal-emails-that-provoked-whistle-blowing-at-team-bondi-blog-entry [accessed 24 May 2016]; As a result of the cumulative testimonies of former Team Bondi employees, the International Game Developers Association announced they would be

studio as one of their own, as previously,[44] Rockstar severed ties with the doomed studio,[45] and walked away having acquired the game's intellectual property rights.[46]

As a by-product of reporting on Team Bondi's poor working conditions, testimonies from ex-employees revealed significant details about Rockstar's involvement in development. It was suggested that they not only 'saved' the project and were vital to its eventual success,[47] but also that Rockstar had significant influence over the shape that the game would take, including character and story decisions.[48] McNamara himself claimed that when Rockstar joined the project, they were especially influential in the casting of actors to play significant roles, making decisions about the shaping of 'Key, iconic characters [which Rockstar] definitely wanted a hand in'. McNamara further noted: 'I think [Rockstar] spend a lot of time on their games trying to get those iconic people right'.[49]

Furthermore, reference is made to Rockstar's spearheading of a defined marketing strategy.[50] This is especially noteworthy as *LAN* employs more-or-less identical marketing and promotion to *RDR,* as explored in later chapters. Moreover, in pre-release interviews with various news outlets the game, its development, and the developers'

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launching an investigation into working conditions at the studio. See Luke Plunkett, '*LA Noire*'s Studio Under Investigation Over Alleged Shonky Work Practices', *Kotaku,* 29 June 2011, http://kotaku.com/5816507/la-noires-studio-under-investigation-over-alleged-shonky-work-practices [accessed 24 May 2016].

[44] For example, when Rockstar acquired Angel Studios in 2002, who were developing *Red Dead Revolver* for Japanese game company Capcom. The studio became Rockstar San Diego.

[45] Plunkett, 'Report'. The fact that Rockstar actively sought to distance themselves from association with Team Bondi after *LAN*'s release is particularly interesting considering that the company has its own history of controversy regarding working practices. See Rockstar Spouse, 'Wives of Rockstar San Diego employees have collected themselves', *Gamasutra,* 1 July 2010, http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/RockstarSpouse/20100107/4032/Wives_of_Rockstar_San_Diego_employees_have_collected_themselves.php [accessed 24 May 2016]; Jason Schreier, 'Inside Rockstar Games' Culture of Crunch', *Kotaku,* 23 October 2018, https://kotaku.com/inside-rockstar-games-culture-of-crunch-1829936466 [accessed 23 October 2018]. These sorts of disputes are common within the video games industry, as major game development companies exploit the idea of 'crunch time' to get games completed to ship on time to demand excessive working hours for their employees. For an overview of the industrial contexts of this, see Randy Nichols, *The Video Game Business* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 155-160.

[46] See Yin-Poole, 'Brendan McNamara'.

[47] One of McMillen's sources expressed the opinion that '[McNamara] treats *LA. Noire* like a success due to his vision but I think Rockstar are the ones who saved the project. They continued to sink money into *LA Noire*, and their marketing was fantastic. Without their continued support, Team Bondi would have gone under several years ago…Rockstar also made a huge contribution to the development; their producers were increasingly influential over the last two years of the game's development, and overruled many of the insane decisions made by Team Bondi management. At a lower level, Rockstar also pitched in with programmers, animators, artists, QA, etc.'. Quoted in McMillen, 'The Emails Behind The Whistle Blowing at Team Bondi'.

[48] One of the anonymous sources suggested that Rockstar had 'lots of creative control' See ibid.

[49] '"Rockstar left me enough rope to hang myself", says *LA. Noire* dev', *Games TM,* https://www.gamestm.co.uk/discuss/la-noire-dev-rockstar-left-me-enough-rope-to-hang-myself/ [accessed 22 November 2016].

[50] See McMillen, 'The Emails Behind the Whistle Blowing at Team Bondi'.

intentions for it are discussed in depth by Brendan McNamara and Jeronimo Barrera, Rockstar's own VP of product development. Interviews were also given by Dan Houser to more mainstream entertainment news outlets like *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Despite not initially owned or developed as a project by Rockstar, their ownership over the project becomes much more than that of a publisher. *LAN* fits comfortably into a wider canon of Rockstar titles that have particular agendas with regards to who players get to control, what they get to do with those characters, and whose stories ultimately unfold and can be enacted. As Barrera explained at the time, 'We love to explore all sorts of period settings so for us it's a perfect match.'[51] And upon rerelease in 2017 reference to Team Bondi was removed from *LAN*'s promotion and box art. It was branded as another title that 'Rockstar Games Presents.'

LAN's historical fiction is largely set in 1947 Los Angeles, and centres on Cole Phelps, a Second World War veteran-turned-LAPD detective. In *LAN*'s physical instructional manual, the game's 'Backstory' is presented as follows:

> In the years after World War II, while many struggled to rebuild their lives in a devastated economy, Los Angeles embraced an era of unprecedented growth and prosperity, and Hollywood became a shining beacon of the American Dream to the rest of the world. Yet beneath the glitz and glamour lay a darker reality: a burgeoning drug trade, young girls, rampant corruption at every level of police and government, and thousands of demobilized troops trying to readjust to civilian life and leave the horrors of war behind. After years of fighting in the Pacific Theatre of World War II, one such young man, Marine Lieutenant Cole Phelps, was awarded one of the Navy's highest honours, the Silver Star, and was honourably discharged. Keen to continue serving his country on home soil, Cole signed up with the L.A.P.D, a force suffering a public relations crisis amid accusations of corruption and brutality. A young, decorated war hero could be just what the department needs to turn the tide of public opinion. The powers that be are watching…[52]

Immediately evoking all the relevant historical buzzwords evoke the 'real' place and time of this fictionalised story, the 'backstory' was illustrated with in-game frame captures of Phelps's past (taken from *LAN*'s cutscene flashbacks to the war) and the present (with Phelps investigating crime scenes). Indeed, there are no 'real' pictures in the entire

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[51] Quote from Jeronimo Barrera in Nick Cowen, '*L.A. Noire* developer interview', *The Telegraph*, 5 January 2011, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/8240920/LA-Noire-developer-interview.htm l [accessed 26 May 2016].

[52] Description of the game's backstory found in the instructional booklet enclosed in the PlayStation3 version of *LAN*, 5.

booklet, only images of the virtual world and characters found in *LAN*'s historic Los Angeles.

Though *LAN* was promoted as a game in which players are personally responsible for 'making or breaking' each case, the narrative is open to very minimal alteration. Like *RDR*, *LAN*'s pre-determined narrative is also advanced by cutscenes.[53] Some are set in 'present day' 1947: depicting events that happen either directly to Phelps (but over which players have no control), or otherwise portraying concurrent events of which Phelps has no knowledge, but are pertinent to either the game narrative or case. On the other hand, some cutscenes depict Phelps' experiences of war in the Pacific, and his interactions with numerous other soldiers, who later feature in *LAN*'s present day. These cutscenes use monochromatic colouring as a marker of historical authenticity, connoting 'pastness'.[54] The game's narrative structure is intentionally convoluted, with players often aware of things that are happening in the wider game world to which their own avatar is not, or else aware of events that do not become significant until even the very end of the game itself. In this sense, it employs a self-consciously 'classic' *noir* narrative frame.[55]

Moreover, gameplay is far more structured and confined than recent Rockstar titles. Despite optional sections of the game in which players can roam the streets of Los Angeles responding to isolated incidents of 'street crime', there are few gameplay affordances outside of investigating individual LAPD cases.[56] Players therefore pursue one after another to advance the narrative, and are given a performance ranking after closing each in turn. These individual cases are structured over the course of five different 'desks' to which Phelps is assigned over the course of the narrative. Starting as a beat cop on Patrol – which functions as the game's tutorial – Phelps is promoted through the ranks of Traffic, Homicide, and Vice, after which events in the narrative bring about his demotion to Arson. Though there are several individual cases per desk, each series of individual crimes usually have a common theme. In Traffic, the cases combine to paint a *noir*ish picture of Los Angeles in 1947, its seediness and criminality, including cases of infidelity, schemes between a woman and her lover to kill her husband, child rape and

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[53] *LAN*'s credits suggest that developers at Rockstar North, not Team Bondi, were responsible for creating these cutscenes, suggesting a further level of Rockstar-authored control over the game's narrative production and content.

[54] The popular and critical association of black and white imagery with historical authenticity and/or pastness is discussed in Paul Grainge, 'TIME's Past in the Present: Nostalgia and the Black and White Image,' *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 3 (1999): 383–92.

[55] The 'classiness' of *film noir*'s complex narrative structure dates back to Nino Frank's original conception of *film noir* in the 1946 essay '*Un nouveau genre "policier": L'aventure criminelle'*

[56] Players can undertake a 'badge pursuit challenge' or collect golden film reels of classic *film noir*s, for example.

exploitation in Hollywood, fraud rackets, and more. By solving these cases, Phelps earns a reputation as being not only a war hero, but one of the LAPD's rising stars.

The Homicide Desk follows Traffic. Inspired by and fictionally-connected to the Elizabeth Short ('Black Dahlia' or 'Werewolf') murder, each of the cases involves the murder and mutilation of women. The overarching theme of the Homicide Desk, therefore, is the historicising of gender relations (or anxieties) following the war. Phelps is then promoted to the Vice Desk after being requested by new partner Roy Earle: a celebrity detective who dresses 'like a movie star'.[57] Through the Vice cases the extent of the LAPD's corruption and exploitation of the criminal underworld become clear to Phelps via Earle (and the department's) close relationships with, in particular, the real-life gangster Mickey Cohen and the city's drug scene. Players investigate a series of interconnected cases in which a shipment of U.S. Army surplus morphine has been linked to several deaths (many within the African American community). Several ex-servicemen known to Phelps from his service in the war are implicated in the theft, after making a deal to sell it to Cohen.

During these missions, Phelps becomes acquainted with German lounge singer Elsa Lichtmann – *LAN*'s attempt at another *noir* trope, the *femme fatale* – eventually having an affair with her. To ensure Phelps becomes the 'fall guy' for a much larger scandal that threatens to shake the foundations of the LAPD, Earle engineers a tabloid exposé of Phelps' infidelity to his wife and betrayal of two young daughters. Phelps sleeping with a foreign 'whore' deflects attention from this larger scandal, and results in not only the loss of his family (and his moving in with Elsa), but his demotion to Arson pending review.

After investigating several house fires with new partner Herschel Biggs, it becomes apparent to Phelps that there is a wider conspiracy at hand. After two families are killed in the fires, Phelps and Biggs begin to investigate the property developer Elysian Fields and its well-connected director Leland Monroe, after being cautioned not to do so by their supervisor because of his connections to high-ranking officials. After Phelps is 'frozen out' of the department, the playable-protagonist shifts to California Fire and Life insurance investigator Jack Kelso, another ex-serviceman with whom Phelps had a tumultuous relationship, and whom players have become acquainted with through the various flashback cutscenes. While controlling Kelso, players operate outside of the legal system to uncover the connections between Elysian Fields, California Fire and Life, and the shadowy Suburban Redevelopment Fund that seems to be connected to all the fires.

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[57] Description given by Phelps in the cutscene preceding mission 'The Driver's Seat'.

Though the shortest section of gameplay comprising only two cases, it is in many respects the most *noir*ish. Divorced from the sanctioned investigative procedures of the LAPD, going out on his own into the seedy underbelly of Los Angeles, through Kelso players get the experience most commonly attributed to *film noir*: the private investigator. The investigation reveals that the Suburban Redevelopment Fund is a sinister conglomerate comprised of many of the city's elite, seeking to get rich(er) by any means necessary: building shoddy homes for GIs directly in the path of the soon-to-be freeways, and exploiting unstable ex-servicemen to commit arson (and resultantly murder) to achieve their goals.

LAN reaches its climax in a final mission where players alternately control Phelps and Kelso and must pursue another ex-serviceman, Ira Hogeboom, through the water supply tunnels under the city, where he has kidnapped and taken Elsa. Hogeboom is one of their former subordinates – traumatised after Phelps inadvertently commanded him to burn a Japanese hospital filled with women and children. Kelso kills Hogeboom as Phelps and Elsa try to escape the increasingly-flooded tunnels. Elsa and Kelso manage to escape, but Phelps is washed away to his death; condemned to die as punishment for his past actions, along with the 'monster' he helped create. The game ends with an extended cutscene depicting Phelps's funeral. While Phelps is named a hero, the fact that the former chief of police (a member of the Suburban Redevelopment Fund) and the new District Attorney (who swore to clean out the former administration's corruption) sit on stage together while Roy Earle delivers the eulogy suggests a massive cover up has been undertaken to keep the extent of the fraud under wraps. The cycle of corruption, it is suggested, continues, despite the best efforts of the two male investigators.

Unsurprisingly, many aspects of *LAN* repeat *noir* conventions. Both the isolated crimes that players investigate, and the overarching story incorporate (in a less-than-subtle pastiche) enough interrelated *noir* themes and elements to comprise several individual films. Everything has the right mix of hypermasculine police procedural action, ex-servicemen trying to reintegrate, 'honest' and 'dirty' cops, drug crime and corruption, *femme fatales*, and *noir*ish settings. But the problem of calling any postmodern text '*noir*', is the lack of agreement on the term's qualities[58] – other than, as James Naremore argues, 'sleekly commodified artistic ambition'.[59] To call *LAN* a pastiche of the 'classical' *film noir*

[58] Andrew Spicer aptly deems the term *film noir* 'contested'. Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 4.
[59] James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998), 10.

is problematic, because the so-called 'classical model is' in itself 'notoriously difficult to pin down', arguably due in large part to the fact that no filmmaker actually ever set out to *make* a *film noir* in the period during which *film noir* was supposed to have existed (c.1941-1958, according to Paul Schrader's 1972 essay).[60] Thus, one of the best ways to try and understand *noir* as signifier is to recognise that it 'belongs to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema. In other words, it has less to do with a group of artefacts than with a discourse– a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings that helps to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies'.[61] For Team Bondi/Rockstar to use a *noir* framing to 'authentically' represent the post-war period – using films as markers by which peoples' expectations for experience are gauged – oversimplifies the fact that while *film noir* is undoubtedly 'an important cinematic legacy', it is 'an idea we have projected onto the past'.[62] It is a projected vision that has – admittedly – become the lens through which most people consider this particular historical space and place.

The fact that the *film noir* label is notoriously fluidly defined complicates analyses of *LAN*. It is difficult to judge how best to study such a postmodern text that is alternately promoted as both 'authentic' and historically accurate in what it represents, but the cinematic (and historical) period to which it ascribes this sense of authenticity is a retroactive construction. Thus, it is likely best to look beyond the superficial labels and aesthetic elements of *LAN* to interrogate the ways in which the (incredibly loose) concept of *noir* has been exploited to serve a wider purpose; and indeed, how a historical setting of 1947 Los Angeles has been employed to tell a very specific historical-yet-fictional story.

The connections between the themes and subtexts of *LAN* and *RDR* (not to mention other Rockstar titles) are stark.[63] Both games take place in dangerous, chaotic, brutalised versions of their respective 'real' worlds, and the hero (often through violence) must navigate and restore order within it – even if only temporarily.[64] Like Marston in *RDR,* the construction of Phelps's (and Kelso's) character is overtly libertarian: the ultimate forces of evil in *LAN* are political and social authorities, and a distinctive brand

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[60] Ibid. In their original production context, these films were defined as detective thrillers, crime dramas, or urban dramas, for example.
[61] Ibid., 11.
[62] Ibid., 11.
[63] This should be of little surprise, in a general sense, considering that academics have noted the way that the Western and the 'hard-boiled detective story' often have certain correlations and appear to represent 'a cultural need to represent the same fantasy in different garb'. See for example Cawelti, 'The Gunfighter and the Hard-Boiled Dick', 54.
[64] The temporary nature of this respite from assault on the player in otherwise anarchic worlds is due likely to the games' generic classification of action-adventure, in which the action is often violence and is a key way in which the narrative is propelled forward via discrete gameplay missions or cases.

of American capitalism and its excesses. While most men are presented as promised and desiring a patch of land to call their own, their desires and 'rights' are exploited by those who would seek to gain from corruption and exploitation. Just as Marston is tasked with pursuing singular 'bad men' to wrest back his freedom from 'ruthless government agents',[65] players in *LAN,* by controlling Phelps, must catch the killer in each case, a singular bad man. It is only in the final narrative portion of *LAN* while controlling Kelso they are able put all the pieces together, finally revealing that (as in *RDR*) behind the surface narrative objectives of these games there 'looms an organization of indeterminate form'[66] which is the ultimate evil. It is either the 'Federal Government' and its agents who want to take control of 'the Frontier' in the former, or Elysian Fields and the Suburban Redevelopment Fund in *LAN* who seek to make themselves rich with the advancement of the Los Angeles freeways. In this sense, both games offer potential for studying how the Rockstar brand manipulates and exploits America's past, how it writes its own histories, and how these are sold by the company as authentic experiences of the past.

[65] Description of the game's story found in the instructional booklet enclosed in PlayStation3 version of *RDR,* 1.
[66] Jeanne Schüler and Patrick Murray, '"Anything Is Possible Here" Capitalism, Neo-Noir, and Chinatown', in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed., Mark T. Conrad, 167-181, 170.

Chapter 1: The Rockstar Brand

'When you unlock the power of rebranding, you can do anything you want. Yes, in our nation's history, nothing has been more important than marketing. It's the thing that built America, and now it's going to build you.'
– *GTAV* radio advert.[1]

'Basically […] we're really good at two things: finishing games and making noise.'
– Terry Donovan, Rockstar Co-Founder and former CEO.[2]

At the turn of the millennium, critics like Naomi Klein and David Boyle began to interrogate the seduction of brands: in a world that was becoming ever-globalised and 'unreal', brands claimed to offer consumers 'authentic' products and experiences.[3] As Boyle outlines, 'marketers believe that this is the force behind brand – a search for some kind of reality', and offering 'a flicker of reality in a virtual world' gives brands 'authority.'[4] Media brands, in particular, attempt to negotiate the myriad 'challenges' of the contemporary globalised entertainment industry, and subsequently draw in consumers, by creating a 'distinct identity' for themselves and their products, preloaded with certain inherent 'qualities' and associations.[5] Branding is, therefore, 'chiefly a source of recognisability and differentiation for media content and providers alike, something that is vital in a market that offers consumers countless options.'[6]

Similarly, game companies have sought to create brands centred around 'consistency, creativity or originality of their output, or the individuality or quirkiness of the game.'[7] Certain games or franchises garner association with particular developers, who

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[1] Script from radio advert entitled 'The Power of Rebranding by Alison Montana 2'.
[2] Quoted in Logan Hill, 'Why Rockstar Games Rule', *Wired*, 1 July 2002, https://www.wired.com/2002/07/rockstar-3/ [accessed 20 August 2018].
[3] Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2000); David Boyle, *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004).
[4] Boyle, *Authenticity*, 35.
[5] Hadas, 'A New Vision', 47; Citing Celia Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (London: Routledge, 2004); Adam Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); and Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2008); See also Daragh O'Reilly and Finola Kerrigan, 'A View to a Brand: Introducting the Film Brandscape', *European Journal of Marketing* 47, no. 5/6 (2013): 769–89.
[6] Hadas, 'A New Vision', 47–48.
[7] Andy Bossom and Ben Dunning, *Video Games: An Introduction to the Industry* (London and New York: Fairchild Books, 2016), 180.

build up their brand identity by offering a particular kind of game experience.[8] While some scholarly interventions have been made into studying 'real world' brands and branding as they appear in video games,[9] or the ways in which video games are developed from existing media brands as an aspect of transmedia storytelling,[10] comparatively little work has focused on video game studio branding, and more specifically, how this branding intersects with and influences the production of games.[11] There is also an absence of studies specific to historical video games, despite the fact that certain game companies-as-brands demonstrate a proclivity for creating games that are inherently historical in nature.[12] Rockstar are indeed one such company. Founded just before, and gaining momentum just after the new millennium with *GTA III*, Rockstar are embedded in these same broad processes and practices of media branding.

When the company was founded in the late 1990s, Rockstar hoped to fashion themselves in the image of 'a lifestyle brand'.[13] Over the years, certain inherent values have become associated with Rockstar and their games – via their own marketing stunts, and emboldened by popular criticism and academic inquiry. This chapter begins to identify these values as a foundation from which to explore how branding has a tangible impact on the creation of representations of the past. With this in mind, it is essential that we consider the way companies present themselves to the public – and ask potential consumers to interact with and buy into their values.

Moreover, media industries and companies have increasingly moved away from approaches that simply advertise 'at' a mass audience. Instead they are now attempting to

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[8] Bungie and *Halo* (2001-), BioWare and *Mass Effect* (2007-) and *Dragon Age* (2009-), and Bethesda and *Fallout* (2004-) and *Elder Scrolls* (1994-) are some examples of this.

[9] For example, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), especially 233-236; Elizabeth Evans, 'The Economics of Free: Freemium Games, Branding and the Impatience Economy', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22, no. 6 (2015): 563–80.

[10] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, especially chapter 6; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

[11] Where these studies do appear, Nintendo are often used as an example of how a brand can become intrinsically associated with certain qualities, such as here 'family friendly' entertainment. See Bossom and Dunning, *Video Games: An Introduction to the Industry*, 189; See also Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, chapter 5; Mia Consalvo, 'Dubbing the Noise: Square Enix and Corporate Creation of Videogames', in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 324–45.

[12] For example, Bethesda, Activision, and 2K Games.

[13] Kushner, *Jacked*, 75. This intention has continued to this day, with Rockstar branching out beyond simply making games to encompass sponsorship of events and selling Rockstar-branded apparel. For example, Rockstar have sponsored the Red Hook Criterium – a cycle race series originating in Brooklyn – since 2013. See 'This Saturday In Brooklyn NYC: First Stage of the 2013 Red Hook Criterium Cycling Series', *Rockstar Newswire*, 16 March 2013, https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/49241/this-saturday-in-brooklyn-nyc-first-stage-of-the-2013-red-hook-c.html [accessed 30 August 2018]. Rockstar branded clothing and accessories – t-shirts, hats, and phone cases, for example – are available to purchase via the Warehouse section of Rockstar's official website.

'pull' in consumers by engaging them 'in conversation in order to nurture a personalized relationship with the brand.'[14] A carefully cultivated brand becomes the 'interface' at which its intrinsic identity and the consumer meet to create value and meaning.[15] In summation, branding seeks to 'give people a sense of what's real', actively endeavours to generate a sense of authenticity for a brand's products (and thus connotes value), distinguish themselves by way of specific values, and perpetuates this value by inducting consumers into their 'branded community', with which they can become 'directly involved'.[16] By first laying out the perceptible elements of Rockstar's brand, we can later explore how they attempt to engage players 'in conversation' with themselves, generating and guiding expectations for historical authenticities.

Open World Games

Both players and the press expect that new games will outdo their predecessors in terms of offering vast, explorable, 'open world' games.[17] Creating open world games – that increase in size, scope and sophistication with every new title – is the mainstay of Rockstar's brand and marketing, as well as popular and critical discourse surrounding the release of their games. When reviews of new titles surface, commentators continually affirm Rockstar's position as 'standard-bearers of the open world',[18] and are similarly keen to point out that the new release builds upon and outdoes the last.[19]

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[14] Helen Powell, 'Introduction: Promotion in an Era of Convergence', in *Promotional Culture and Convergence: Markets, Methods, Media*, ed. Helen Powell (London: Routledge, 2013), 2; See also Christina Spurgeon, *Advertising and New Media* (London: Routledge, 2007); Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson offer a useful, tempering counterpoint to suggestions of a widespread shift from 'interruption to engagement' in advertising; that 'accounts of a move from "interruptive" to "engagement" advertising need to be understood [...] as part of a discursive shift whereby the advertising industry is attempting to make sense of the impact of the changes to promotional screen culture wrought by digitization.' See Grainge and Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries*, 30.

[15] Cheryl Martens, 'Connecting With Consumers: Branding and Convergence', in *Promotional Culture and Convergence: Markets, Methods, Media*, ed. Helen Powell (London: Routledge, 2013), 90; Citing Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*.

[16] Martens, 'Connecting with Consumers', 92.

[17] For an overview of the term, its fluid definitions and history, see Richard Moss, 'Roam Free: a history of open world gaming', *arsTechnica,* 25 March 2017, https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2017/03/youre-now-free-to-move-about-vice-city-a-history-of-open-world-gaming/ [accessed 27 August 2018].

[18] This discourse remains the same decades apart. See for example Nick Cowen, '*Red Dead Redemption* Video Game Preview', *The Telegraph*, 5 June 2009, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/5453573/Red-Dead-Redemption-video-game-preview.html [accessed 31 August 2018]; Nick Cowen, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Exclusive Gameplay Preview: Riding with the Dutch van Der Linde Gang', *The Telegraph*, 4 May 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gaming/features/red-dead-redemption-2-exclusive-gameplay-preview-riding-dutch/ [accessed 4 May 2018].

[19] This kind of rhetoric is already present in the build-up to the release of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, based on reviewer previews alone. See Nick Cowen, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* | How Rockstar Is Building Its Biggest Ever Game', *The Telegraph*, 3 May 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gaming/features/red-dead-

Take-Two's official press releases for Rockstar titles also explicitly reference the company's achievements and 'reputation as creators of complex living worlds', largely 'cemented' by and through *GTA*.[20] Indeed, the promotion of *GTAV* is symptomatic of Rockstar's self-proclaimed success and experience with open world games. When its development was announced, *GTAV* was pronounced 'the largest and most ambitious game Rockstar has yet created', and 'a bold new direction in open-world freedom'.[21] Quotes from Sam Houser in various press releases described it as 'our deepest, most beautiful and most immersive world yet', claiming that Rockstar were continuing 'to push the [*GTA*] series forward in new ways',[22] and that the game 'builds on everything we've learned about open world game design.'[23] Another press release highlighted choice quotations from reviews of the game, most of which praised the vastness, complexities, or some other aspect of the game's world.[24]

Ultimately it was claimed that, in *GTAV*, Rockstar were following an established 'tradition of award-winning open world games with the 2010 blockbuster Western, [*RDR*], and the ground-breaking detective thriller [*LAN*] in 2011.'[25] Both case studies for this thesis are therefore, in Rockstar's own estimations, strong examples of open world games that live up to and perform their brand identity and values. This brand

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redemption-2-rockstar-building-biggest-ever-game/ [accessed 4 May 2018]; Devin Coldewey, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Sees Rockstar Raising the Bar for Realism in Open-World Games', *TechCrunch*, 9 August 2018, https://techcrunch.com/2018/08/09/red-dead-redemption-2-sees-rockstar-raising-the-bar-for-realism-in-open-world-games/[accessed 9 August 2018].

[20] This standardised description of Rockstar features in a number of press releases; see for example 'Rockstar Games Announces 4 New Versions of L.A. Noire coming November 17, 2017'; 'Rockstar Games Announces Red Dead Redemption 2® Coming Fall 2017'.

[21] Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games Announces Grand Theft Auto V', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc,* 3 November 2011, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1625672 [accessed 27 August 2018].

[22] Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games Announces Red Dead Redemption 2® Coming Fall 2017', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc,* 31 January 2013, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1780040 [accessed 27 August 2018].

[23] Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games Announces Grand Theft Auto V Coming Spring 2013', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc,* 30 October 2012, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1751693 [accessed 27 August 2018]; See also Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games® Announces Grand Theft Auto V Release Date', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc,* 17 September 2013, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1855348 [accessed 27 August 2018]. An almost identical statement from Houser was featured in the announcement of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. See Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games Announces Red Dead Redemption 2® Coming Fall 2017', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc,* 18 October 2016, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=2212672 [accessed 27 August 2018].

[24] Moreover, *Grand Theft Auto Online, GTAV*'s online multiplayer mode, was similarly described as being a 'revolutionary new open world online game'. See Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games® Announces Grand Theft Auto V® Now Available', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc,* 17 September 2013, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1855348 [accessed 27 August 2018].

[25] Take-Two, 'Rockstar Games Announces Grand Theft Auto V'.

association – for creating vast and immersive open world games – has particular relevance for the way Rockstar seek to historicise gameplay options and game world, as explored in chapter four.

Rockstar as Outsider

Paradoxically, Rockstar have also cultivated an image of industry outsider. In 2009, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter offered one of the only substantial studies of how Rockstar brand themselves as the problem child of the games industry, observing that 'Rockstar Games, with its parent company [Take-Two], has perfected a lucrative corporate strategy of making titles calculated to provoke moral panic.'[26] *GTA*, their flagship franchise, is 'probably the most celebrated *and* vilified video game of all time,' largely because of the multi-dimensional violence it depicts and in which it allows players to engage.[27] With high-profile enemies from politicians like (at the time, Senator) Hillary Clinton to evangelical lawyers like Jack Thompson,[28] the release of almost every title in their portfolio has been accompanied by some kind of backlash, ranging from the 'hot coffee' incident around the release of *GTA: San Andreas* (2005),[29] to repeated public outcry about violence against women that remains a consistent feature of their games,[30] to the sort of 'race tourism' their games appear to indulge.[31] As Bonnie Ruberg articulates, '[t]hese games have been so widely and frequently cited as examples of violent content that the words "Grand Theft Auto" themselves have come to function as a synecdoche

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[26] Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 155.

[27] Emphasis in original text. Ibid., 155.

[28] Curt Feldman and Brendan Sinclair, 'Hillary Clinton to Take on Rockstar over Hot Coffee', *Gamespot*, 13 July 2005, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/hillary-clinton-to-take-on-rockstar-over-hot-coffee/1100-6129021/ [accessed 31 August 2018]; Julian Benson, 'The Rise and Fall of Video Gaming's Most Vocal Enemy', *Kotaku*, 15 September 2015, http://www.kotaku.co.uk/2015/09/15/the-rise-and-fall-of-video-gamings-most-vocal-enemy [accessed 27 August 2018].

[29] Aphra Kerr, 'Spilling Hot Coffee? *Grand Theft Auto* as Contested Cultural Product', in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 17–34.

[30] Regarding *GTAV*, see for example Colin Campbell, '*Grand Theft Auto 5's* Misogyny Is a Problem Its Creators Must Finally Address', *Polygon*, 10 December 2014, https://www.polygon.com/2014/12/10/7364823/gta-5s-vicious-misogyny-ought-to-be-addressed-not-ignored [accessed 27 August 2018]; Rockstar titles frequently feature in the work of video game critic Anita Sarkeesian, and particularly the 'Tropes vs Women' series of video essays published via FeministFrequency. See for example Anita Sarkeesian, 'Women as Background Decoration (Part 1)', *FeministFrequency*, 16 June 2014, http://feministfrequency.com/2014/06/16/women-as-background-decoration-tropes-vs-women/.

[31] Tanner Higgin, 'Play-Fighting: Understanding Violence in *Grand Theft Auto III*', in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 70–87; David Leonard, 'Virtual Gangstas, Coming to a Suburban House Near You: Demonization, Commodification, and Policing Blackness', in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006).

for problematic video games.'[32] This is a strategy intended to ensure their status as rebellious outsider, not an unforeseen by-product.

Journalists have, for their part, helped mythologise the notion of Rockstar as an 'outlaw' brand.[33] But while bad press seems to only 'strengthen' Rockstar's image as the 'bad boy of the game industry',[34] Rockstar use this image to their advantage by actively incorporating the morally-loaded indignation often levelled at them (and the industry in general) into their brand identity. Their mailing list appears in subscribers' inboxes from the sender 'Rockstar Propaganda'. Visitors to the company's official website are greeted by a series of changing taglines along the top menu bar, beneath the official Rockstar logo:

PUSHING FILTH AND RUINING LIVES, MADE EASY.

KILLING DREAMS MURDERING HOPE FIGHTING THE RIGHTEOUS BULLYING THE WEAK.

MAKING GLIB COMMENTS AND BAD JOKES SINCE 1998.

DIGITAL LUNACY SINCE 1998.

HATED BY MOST, LOVED BY THE LOST.

FIGHTING GOOD FOR ALL MANKIND SINCE 1998.[35]

Branding a site where fans can buy Rockstar-logo-adorned merchandise, as well as actual objects from their games, these tongue-in-cheek, anti-the-system sentiments explicitly reference the kind of values and attitudes they are selling as an intrinsic part of their brand. 'Hated by most, loved by the lost' is a particularly noteworthy example, considering Dan Houser's claim that one of Rockstar's aims is to 'make games that we wouldn't be embarrassed to be caught playing ourselves.'[36] Rockstar seeks to position themselves on the side of the often-maligned imagined demographic of video game players – especially the insiders like themselves who 'get it', not outsiders like politicians or corporate suits. As Houser continued, 'Games [have been] ghettoised as being for children and we were

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[32] Ruberg, 'Representing Sex Workers in Video Games', 11.
[33] For example, and perhaps most prominently, Kushner, *Jacked*.
[34] Peter Zackariasson and Mikolaj Dymek, *Video Game Marketing: A Student Textbook* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016).
[35] All statements taken from Rockstar official website throughout January 2018.
[36] Cited in MediaGuardian, '28. Sam and Dan Houser', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/jul/19/sam-and-dan-houser-mediaguardian-100-2010 [accessed 10 June 2016].

one of the companies that helped to, or are still helping, to change that perception.'[37] Aimed at a 'mature' audience that will appreciate the heightened 'realism' of their games,[38] and 'get' the jokes,[39] Rockstar signal allegiance and acceptance to those who participate in the company's branded community, defined as it is by the tastes and values of the men who continue to run Rockstar at an executive level.

While keen to position themselves as the *enfant terrible* of the games industry, Rockstar are nonetheless deeply implicated in the global capitalist system it participates in; and *GTA* in particular is inextricable from 'the structural violence of Empire, that is, the systemic patterns of inequality and marginalization inherent to global capital.'[40] Though their games are often preoccupied with representing and telling the stories of the criminal underclass, the amount of money that Rockstar earn – as a company, and individually at a senior level, is in excess of millions of dollars.[41]

Ironically, when U.S. President Donald Trump called a meeting of video game executives to discuss violent video games in early 2018, Take-Two's CEO Strauss Zelnick was one of only two representatives of game publishers present. Although a shrewd move in terms of potential damage control for a company that is almost-always at the epicentre of moral panics over violence, video games, and school shootings, this decision indicates that Rockstar – or at least, their parent company, with which they have always had a close relationship[42] – are not actually above public corporate strategising. However, it is also worth noting that Zelnick, as the corporate face of Take-Two, was present, as opposed to the Housers on a Rockstar-executive level, keeping them one step removed from the business of being 'suits'.[43] Moreover, lawsuits levelled against individual users of their

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[37] Cited in Ibid.

[38] That Rockstar's games are aimed at an 'aging' demographic of 18-35 year olds is discussed in a *Vanity Fair* interview with Dan Houser around the time of *RDR*'s release. See Claire Walla, '*Red Dead Redemption*'s Cinematic Ancestors, From John Ford to Sergio Leone', *Vanity Fair*, 18 May 2010, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2010/05/red-dead-redemptions-cinematic-ancestors-from-john-ford-to-sergio-leone [accessed 27 August 2018]; See also Kerr, 'Spilling Hot Coffee?'.

[39] Explored by Krüger, 'Facing Fanon', 4.

[40] Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 156.

[41] By this, I specifically mean those who were known as the 'Rockstar principals': Sam Houser, Dan Houser, and former head of Rockstar North Leslie Benzies. These figures were claimed in a 2016 lawsuit filed by the latter against the former and Take-Two. The ongoing lawsuit between Leslie Benzies, and Dan and Sam Houser, Rockstar and Take-Two is indicative of the stakes of this; with damages being sought in excess of hundreds of millions of dollars. See for example Colin Campbell, 'The Great *Grand Theft Auto* Lawsuit Explained', *Polygon*, 14 April 2016, https://www.polygon.com/2016/4/14/11428072/the-great-grand-theft-auto-lawsuit-explained [accessed 14 April 2016].

[42] Before joining Take-Two in 2007, Zelnick worked for, among other media entertainment companies, BMG Entertainment, where Sam Houser also began his career.

[43] This is, of course, despite the fact it is Sam Houser who provides quotes for any of Take-Two's industry-focussed press releases, which routinely appear under the corporate information section of Take-Two's website. The struggle to keep Rockstar as its own brand away from its corporate parent appears to be a long-running tension, as observed in Kushner, *Jacked*, 57.

games – especially modders[44] – are sued by Take-Two, not Rockstar.[45] Take-Two also have their own history of involvement in the dubious corporate activities that Rockstar seek to satire in their games.[46]

Rockstar have long 'benefited from carefully cultivated hype' which they have actively accrued through having such a renegade reputation.[47] Yet, despite their branding and claims, there is little of the independent, anti-corporate 'outsider' in the way they conduct themselves and their business. By both the admission of their leadership and their core brand values, they are deeply inspired by, invested and implicated in the society and game industry culture they seek to critique from a distance. This is therefore a pseudo-status, albeit one that is skilfully-performed and appears to have currency and longevity: especially for their game's perceived function as cultural history or 'satire'.

Rockstar (g)ames as Satire; Rockstar as Cultural Historian

In *RDR*'s opening cutscene, John Marston takes a train from Blackwater to Armadillo, where upon arrival, the player takes control. Along the way, the cutscene depicts Marston listening to the conversations of other passengers around him. They discuss the 'civilisation' of the land, the 'saving' of savages for heaven, the class-based assumptions on what kind of family should govern the area, and new, miraculous technological developments spreading across the nation. In this relatively-short scene, not only do Rockstar set the tone for the player, but they also implicitly offer commentary on these anachronistic, bigoted ways of seeing the world, while Marston silently listens.

Similar cutscenes are present in *GTA IV* (2008), *GTAV,* and *LAN*, intended to set the tone, situate the playable-protagonist at the centre of the world, and guide the player's expectations, usually in a tongue-in-cheek or blatantly hyperbolic way. The opening cutscene for *GTAV,* for example, shows one of the game's three playable-

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[44] A modder is a player who intentionally modifies a game's code to their own gameplay advantage or produce a specific outcome. See for example Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2007).

[45] See for example Kyle Evans, 'Take Two is suing a *GTA Online* modder', *Rockstar Intel,* 14 May 2018, https://rockstarintel.com/2018/05/14/take-two-is-suing-an-australian-gta-online-modder/ [accessed 16 May 2018]. This is, however, another example of how Take-Two as parent company are used to shield Rockstar's own corporate strategising and actions. That is, despite cultivating early relationships with online communities of modders – who essentially provided free press or 'hype' for their games via hacking the games and sharing mods online – after the 'Hot Coffee' incident it seems that Rockstar did an about-face in their cosiness with modders; using them to distract attention from their own wrong-doing in hiding explicit content in their games, not removing it entirely. See Kushner, *Jacked*, 211-213 especially.

[46] See Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 173–78.

[47] Hill, 'Why Rockstar Games Rule'.

protagonists Michael De Santa bemoaning the fact that he – a white, middle-aged, former criminal in witness protection – barely fits into his family dynamic, let alone contemporary American society. *LAN*'s opening cutscene – in the style of *L.A. Confidential's* (1997) opening sequence – aims to expose the hypocrisies underlying the image of Los Angeles and Hollywood as a paradise. Accompanied by title credits, and the declaration 'Rockstar Games Presents', the company sets themselves up in the role of developer-historian, introducing players to their historical narratives, but also signalling to fans that they too are outsiders observing a particular time and place, exposing – and passing judgement – on it and its people.

In public discourse, there is a tendency for evaluations of Rockstar's games to commend them for offering access to a cleverly satirised simulacra of America, and Rockstar as a company – chiefly its executive level creatives, such as Dan Houser – are afforded the status of the cultural commentators behind these scathing representations.[48] Later games in the *GTA* franchise appear as conscious attempts to mediate the 'spirit or soul'[49] of particular American spaces. In game criticism, *GTA* is a series seemingly without equal, having been described as the 'capo di tutti of crime video games'; but more importantly here, 'less a videogame franchise, more an interactive cultural barometer'.[50] *GTA IV* was described by one review for the *New York Times* as 'a violent, intelligent, profane, endearing, obnoxious, sly, richly textured and thoroughly compelling work of cultural satire disguised as fun.'[51] And indeed, historians themselves have reflected on the ways in which Rockstar (albeit with a certain tunnel-vision) do capture significant themes often read as central to the process of American history: namely the capitalistic violence that so often appears to underpin it.[52] Some academics, on the other hand, have read the series as a representation of Bakhtin's concept of the world as subversive carnival.[53] Similarly Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum contest that '[i]n our increasingly mediated

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[48] Soraya Murray similarly notes that Rockstar have a reputation for offering 'iconoclastic, satirical and critique-oriented scenarios'. See Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, 193-195 especially.

[49] Zach Whalen, 'Cruising in San Andreas: Ludic Space and Urban Aesthetics in *Grand Theft Auto'*, in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson and London: Macfarlane and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 145.

[50] Hill, '*Grand Theft Auto V*: Meet Dan Houser, Architect of a Gaming Phenomenon'.

[51] Seth Schiesel, '*Grand Theft Auto* Takes On New York', *The New York Times*, 28 April 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/28/arts/28auto.html [accessed 15 May 2018].

[52] Robert Whitaker, 'Rockstar's History of America', *Eurogamer*, 7 November 2018, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-11-05-rockstars-history-of-america [accessed 7 November 2018]

[53] David Annandale, 'The Subversive Carnival of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas'*, in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 88–103.

society, what is perceived as real and what is mediated are notions that are becoming blurred', and therefore *GTA* offers 'a critique as well as affirmation of the influence of media on people in the developed world'.[54] Credit is overwhelmingly given to the company for making games that appear to offer commentary or insight into contemporary society: its ills, hypocrisies, and contradictions. All the while, 'real world' research – visiting Miami to capture its essence for *GTA: Vice City*, or immersion in 'real' gang-controlled spaces of Los Angeles, casting real life gang members and rappers as voice actors in *GTA: San Andreas* – has always been a marketed aspect of Rockstar's development process, designed to give the impression that they were capturing something 'real', and that '*GTA* had always been about authenticity.'[55] But this 'research' appears to be less concerned with capturing the lived experience or history of certain places than it is about capturing a sense of what Rockstar *thinks* these places represent, and wants to replicate via their game worlds and narratives.

The British, Scottish, and otherwise non-U.S. identity of Rockstar executives like the Housers, and until recently Leslie Benzies, is usually positioned as key to Rockstar's offering of an outsider perspective on American culture and society. As Seth Schiesel articulated,

> *Grand Theft Auto IV* is such a simultaneously adoring and insightful take on modern America that it almost had to come from somewhere else. The game's main production studio is in Edinburgh, and Rockstar's leaders, the brothers Dan and Sam Houser, are British expatriates who moved to New York to indulge their fascination with urban American culture. Their success places them firmly among the distinguished cast of Britons from Mick Jagger and Keith Richards through Tina Brown who have flourished by identifying key elements of American culture, repackaging them for mass consumption and selling them back at a markup.[56]

Despite the fact that Sam and Dan Houser have resided in the U.S. for almost-two decades, the importance of Rockstar's perceived Britishness is consistently remarked upon by reviewers of their games.[57] It also features in Rockstar-curated news releases

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[54] Bogost and Klainbaum, 'Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice City', 175.
[55] Kushner, *Jacked*, 166.
[56] Schiesel, 'Grand Theft Auto Takes On New York'.
[57] See for example Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, '*Grand Theft Auto* Franchise Playfully Flicks Mud at Its Birthplace: Scotland', *The New York Times*, 29 September 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/technology/grand-theft-auto-franchise-playfully-flings-mud-at-its-birthplace-scotland.html [accessed 20 August 2018]; Ed Smith, '"Grand Theft Auto IV" Shows the Importance of Outsider Perspective', *Waypoint*, 23 April 2017, https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/aepp9z/grand-theft-auto-iv-shows-the-importance-of-outsider-perspective [accessed 20 August 2018]; Destrolyn Bechgeddig, '*Grand*

promoting their titles,[58] and is emphasised by company executives in public appearances.[59] Positioning themselves as an outsider to the industry and a brand offering something anarchic and anti-establishment, compounded by their majority British ownership and leadership, has afforded them status as outsiders with critical authority. However, their tendency to arrogate politically and culturally-informed satire for their products – aimed at American privilege and its contradictions – tends to distort 'a few home truths' about the company's own corporate standing and indeed, the privilege of their own executives. The Housers are, after all, wealthy private school and Oxford-educated Brits, benefitting both from having famous parentage and the longstanding cultural dominance of the British empire.[60]

Indeed, despite widespread critical adulation, their titles have otherwise been appraised as politically and ideologically ambiguous; dabbling in 'conservative political rhetoric', while appearing to 'satire' it.[61] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter assess that *GTA* in particular 'is a cynical game that simultaneously satirizes, indulges, and normalizes individual hyperpossessiveness, racialized stereotypes, and neoliberal violence in a self-cancellation that allows these elements to remain intact, a structure that is, in a very precise way, conservative.'[62] But there is some similar ambiguity in the way that academics appear to at once to both affirm and berate Rockstar's incorporation of (largely conservative or neoliberal) ideologies into their titles.[63] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter

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Theft Auto: A Very British Game About America', *Game Skinny*, 16 September 2013, https://www.gameskinny.com/w1m9d/grand-theft-auto-a-very-british-game-about-america [accessed 20 August 2018].

[58] A number of posts on Rockstar's *Newswire* concern British culture, especially to promote the only UK-set content Rockstar have developed, *GTA: London 1969*, a mission pack for the first *GTA* released in 1999. For example, the death of John Berger was used as a means of drawing attention back to the game in 1997. See 'RIP John Berger, Famous British Novelist, Art Critic and Secret GTA: London Villain', *Rockstar Newswire*, 3 January 2017, https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/60097/RIP-John-Berger-Famous-British-Novelist-Art-Critic-and-Secret-GTA-Lond [accessed 4 October 2017].

[59] Dan Houser, for example, emphasises the fact that the senior executives of Rockstar are mostly British, and that they grew up absorbing a great deal of British culture, while accepting their BAFTA fellowship in 2014 – little surprise, perhaps, given the occasion. See 'Rockstar Games awarded Academy Fellowship | BAFTA Games Awards 2014'.

[60] Sam and Dan Houser attended private school, with the latter being a graduate of Oxford University. See Martyn McLaughlin, 'Lawsuit Lays Bare Rockstar North Power Struggle', *The Scotsman*, 20 April 2016, https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/martyn-mclaughlin-lawsuit-lays-bare-rockstar-north-power-struggle-1-4105187 [accessed 20 August 2018].

[61] Ian Bogost, 'Videogames and Ideological Frames', *Popular Communication* 4, no. 3 (2006): 175–80; Moreover, a more recent study of the ways in which video games incorporate or make reference to the global recession included *GTAIV* and *GTAV* to similarly address its conflicted ideological engagements, both seeming to question and uphold the ideology of the 'American Dream'. See Óliver Pérez-Latorre et al., 'Recessionary Games: Video Games and the Social Imaginary of the Great Recession (2009–2015)', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 2017, 11.

[62] Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 181.

[63] Dyer-Withford and De Peuter, Paul Barrett, David Leonard, and Tanner Higgin, for example, all read certain ideological stances in *GTA* – particularly neoliberalism, its expression in racialized violence, or both.

place the significance of, for example, *GTA*: *Vice City's* representation of the effects of neoliberalism and global capitalism in the 1980s, over the fact that it remediates films and television shows like *Scarface* (1983), *The Godfather* (1972), and *Miami Vice* (1984-90), presenting the games as intended allegories for and socio-political engagements with the spread of neoliberalism and its effects in the early 2000s when it was released.[64] Ian Bogost suggests that while Rockstar's titles (particularly *GTA: San Andreas*) often incorporate political and ideological opposites, this 'does not necessarily indicate that commercial developers have a hidden political agenda. For better or worse, it is much more likely that they are unaware that the procedural interaction in the game can imply a particular ideological stance.'[65] Indeed, Bogost argues that is only critics who are in a position to '[unpack] ideology' in games such as these.[66] It is more likely that Rockstar, in their choice of cultural (and personal) reference points for creating games, have inherited the often conservative politics of much of these inspirations, growing up 'obsessed' with 70s and 80s American culture, drawn from what Susan Faludi defined as an era of conservative cultural 'backlash.'[67] This does not absolve them from responsibility in reinforcing these ideological and political structures – and it is indeed dangerous to entirely extricate games from the (sometimes unintended) 'insidious ideological arguments' they make.[68] But we can contextualise Rockstar's games – and their ambivalent politics – as a product of the wider media industries they interact with:

> The games industry, like the rest of popular culture, has learned that irony is a no-lose gambit, a 'have your cake and eat it too' strategy whose simultaneous affirmation/negation structure can give the appearance of social critique and retract it in the same moment—thereby letting everything stay just as it is while allowing practitioners to feel safely above it all even as they sink more deeply in.[69]

See Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*; Paul Barrett, 'White Thumbs, Black Bodies: Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Fantasies in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*', *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2006): 95–119; Leonard, 'Virtual Gangstas, Coming to a Suburban House Near You: Demonization, Commodification, and Policing Blackness'; Higgin, 'Play-Fighting: Understanding Violence in *Grand Theft Auto III*'; In a similar vein, Sara Humphreys uses the ideological underpinnings of the American Frontier in her reading of *RDR*. See Humphreys, 'Rejuvenating "Eternal Inequality"'.

[64] The authors do the same for *GTA: San Andreas* and its mediation of Los Angeles history, particularly with a racial dynamic as expressed in the riots of 1992, rather than Bogost and Klainbaum's overriding analytical reference point being *Boyz N the Hood*. See Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 164–70; Bogost and Klainbaum, 'Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice CIty'.

[65] Bogost, 'Videogames and Ideological Frames', 180.

[66] Ibid., 180.

[67] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1992).

[68] Adrienne Shaw, 'The Tyranny of Realism', 7. See also Murray, 'The Poetics of Form and the Politics of Identity in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*'; Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), for discussion of ideologies in video games.

[69] Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, 277.

Rockstar want to 'have it all': to affirm their 'outsider' status by parodying American society and culture, while upholding the hegemonies of a capital-driven entertainment industry, or a white-centric conservative consensus about American society's past and present.[70]

In 2009, TIME named Sam and Dan Houser among the 100 most influential people in the world. The accompanying profile of them elevated their status and influence to that of cultural historians: as artists offering the equivalent video game view on recent American cultural, social, and political history once offered by writers and social commentators such as 'Tom Wolfe […] Balzac or Dickens'.[71] Around the time of its release, *GTA IV*'s co-writers Dan Houser and Rupert Humphries were similarly commended for creating a script that 'reveals a mastery of street patois to rival Elmore Leonard's.'[72] In discussing the advent of new 'non-fiction novels' and the 'New Journalism' from the 1960s onwards – the work of writers like Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, and Norman Mailer, for example – Linda Hutcheon writes that the appeal and form of these novels was less concerned with objectivity, and more about the author's own opinions and observations (and hence the 'structuring' of their narrative). 'Truth', in this sense, was 'guaranteed' by the author's own opinion of what they *perceived*, and kind of 'social realism' they then documented.[73] It is this sort of perceived critical stance that perhaps holds the key to Rockstar's success both in positioning themselves as cultural critics and generating a distinct 'Rockstar' brand. It is Rockstar's own 'structuring' of history in these games, and their interpretation and (re)presentation of these periods that appears to draw consumers in their millions to their version of 'truths' about the American experience.

Rockstar and American Cinema

Scholarship on what is often referred to as the 'convergence' between video games and cinema has been growing since the first edited collection was published in the early

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[70] The way that *GTA* (and *GTAV* specifically) upholds colonialist, white-centric, racialised ideologies is argued and developed in Krüger, 'Facing Fanon'.
[71] Matt Selman, 'Sam and Dan Houser', *Time*, 30 April 2009, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1894410_1893836_1894428,00.html [accessed 10 June 2016].
[72] Schiesel, '*Grand Theft Auto Takes* On New York'.
[73] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 115–16; citing John Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 10.

2000s.[74] These sorts of academic inquiries have looked, for example, at the ways in which cinematic technologies and techniques have influenced the medium of video games (and vice versa), and how particular generic, narrative, and stylistic conventions move between them. Though something of a catch-all term with malleable meaning, games that are described as 'cinematic' are usually those that repurpose tropes and 'draw upon pre-existing visual literacy from Hollywood genre films.'[75] Though these kinds of uncritical qualifications are now frequently challenged,[76] there has often been an 'assumption' that '"more cinematic" equals "better" and more distinctive gameplay'.[77]

As Frans Mäyrä articulates, 'at the end of the 1990s' – notably, at the time Rockstar was founded – 'some concerned game designers […] started to write about the "movie envy" affecting the games industry: the pursuit of the cultural status of cinema'.[78] This trend of noting that comparatively newer media are becoming ever more cinematic, and thus attempting to imbue texts with greater prestige, is not confined to video games alone.[79] It is however in line with wider trends in the recycling of movie images, as observed by postmodern theorists like Hutcheon:

> [G]one is the Benjaminian 'aura' with its notions of originality, authenticity, and uniqueness, and with these go all the taboos against strategies that rely on the parody and appropriation of already existing representations. In other words, the history of representation itself can become a valid subject of art.[80]

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[74] See for example Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, eds., *Screenplay*; Robert Alan Brookey, *Hollywood Gamers: Digital Convergence in the Film and Video Game Industries* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010); Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers, 'Introduction: Manifest Narrativity – Video Games, Movies, and Art and Adaptation', in *Game On, Hollywood! Essays on the Intersections of Video Games and Cinema*, ed. Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2015), 7–18; Ivan Girina, 'Video Game Mise-En-Scene Remediation of Cinematic Codes in Video Games', in *Interactive Storytelling*, ed. Hartmut Koenitz et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2013), 45–54.

[75] Soraya Murray, *On Video Games*, 184–85. Usefully, Murray uses *Max Payne 3*, developed by Rockstar, as an example of how video games rely on the excessive pre-existing mediation of the city in visual culture.

[76] See for example Ed Smith, 'They May Look Great, But Video Games Can Never Be "Cinematic"', *Vice*, 15 February 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/they-may-look-great-but-video- games-can-never-be-cinematic-510 [accessed 20 March 2017].

[77] King and Krzywinska, *Screenplay*, 6.

[78] Frans Mäyrä, *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008) Citing Richard Rouse III, 'Gaming and Graphics: Computer Games, Not Computer Movies', ACM SIGGRAPH Computer Graphics, 34.4 (2000), 5-7.

[79] As Jason Mittell explains, this trend of 'holding on to cross-media metaphors' is usually done to describe a certain kind of pre-validated creative 'aspiration', with a view toward a text's 'legitimation'. For example, since the early 2000s there has been a tendency to 'frame' shifts in the 'complexity' of television storytelling as the medium 'becoming more "literary" or "cinematic", drawing both prestige and formal vocabulary from these older, more culturally distinguished media', in the way they are described in reviews and promotion. See Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 2; See also Ed Vollans, 'Cross Media Promotion: Entertainment Industries and the Trailer' (Doctoral Thesis, University of East Anglia, 2014).

[80] My emphasis. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 32.

What Vera Dika relatedly refers to as 'past movie memories' can be currency in contemporary media entertainment that seeks to (re)tell historical stories, as noted in the introduction to this thesis.[81]

This is a core part of the way representatives of Rockstar's creative talent and executives communicate to the press and fans. Rockstar has long sought to establish their image as a company that makes inherently 'cinematic' games, and are self-actualised as a company with a 'long-standing love of American culture.'[82] Both Rockstar's brand and marketing strategy actively promote a kind of interactive experience constructed largely through references to the mediation of America's past and present in wider (predominantly audio-visual) culture. They view all of their games as offering 'incredibly cinematic experiences', claiming that they have consciously tried to – in the words of VP of Product Development Jeronimo Barrera — '[blur] the lines' between cinema and games.[83] Even the most cursory search for articles on, or reviews of their titles will find repeated reference to their cinematic aesthetic, experience, or intertextuality, with some offering 'cinematic primers' for playing specific Rockstar games.[84] The term 'cinematic' is of course a useful subjectivity, rather than something with a stable meaning.

Rockstar's output as a studio almost exclusively consists of games which depict or reference iconic moments or specific examples of American cinema.[85] In this sense, references to cinema and cultural history have always played an important role in both developing and promoting their titles. Furthermore, the expected player experience that Rockstar foregrounded in the promotion of certain titles is predicated on players wanting to enact what, for example, action cinema heroes do on screen. For example, in the case

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[81] Vera Dika, 'Between Nostalgia and Regret: Strategies of Historical Disruption from Douglas Sirk to Mad Men', in *Hollywood and the American Historical Film*, ed. J.E. Smyth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 209.

[82] Dan Houser, quoted in Gaudiosi, 'Rockstar Games' Dan Houser on "L.A. Noire's" Selection by the Tribeca Film Festival'; See also comments made by Sam Houser in Utichi, 'The Biggest Entertainment Release Ever?'

[83] Quoted in Nick Cowen, '*L.A. Noire* Developer Interview', *The Telegraph*, 5 January 2011, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/8240920/LA-Noire-developer-interview.html [accessed 26 May 2016].

[84] For example, Stephen Lambrechts, 'IGN's Guide To Film Noir', *IGN*, 12 December 2010, http://uk.ign.com/articles/2010/12/13/igns-guide-to-film-noir?page=1 [accessed 20 May 2016].

[85] Perhaps in support of this, historically Take-Two actively solicited cross-promotional marketing opportunities; whether in terms of creating video game soundtrack, using the likenesses of famous figures in their games, and/or taking advantage of 'co-branding opportunities'. 'Take Two Interactive Software, Inc., 'Annual Report 2008', p. 7, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-reportsannual [accessed 27 August 2018]. This statement, regarding their marketing practices, can be found in the Annual Reports between 2004 and 2009, but from 2011 onwards this paragraph was omitted (the Annual Report for 2010 is missing).

of the *Max Payne* franchises, 'the experience of playing any Max Payne game [...] is meant to take that passively vicarious thrill of seeing [in films] a cool and unflappable hero dispense justice and revenge – and turn it into an adrenaline-pumping first-hand sensation of action.'[86] A kind of cine-literacy is both expected and encouraged in the consumption of their games.[87]

Rockstar have thus tried to engineer their public image as that of a company committed to proving the cultural status of video games, relative to (and going beyond) cinema's prestige.[88] In Dan Houser's words:

> Rockstar was founded with the mission statement that video games were the next mass-market entertainment medium, that they were uniquely interesting and powerful, and that we as a company would serve two masters to prove this fact: combining the production values of movies, with an obsession with gameplay, above all else.[89]

While video games are presented here as 'unique' in their power, it is from cinema, and cinema history, that Rockstar claims to draw inspiration – and indeed, cultural legitimation – for creating texts that combine the essence of movies with the possibility for player interaction and enjoyment.

Rockstar also appear to have emulated the logic of the film industry, particularly the Hollywood studio system, incorporating this mimicry into their brand image. While asserting Rockstar's mission statement above, Dan Houser compared his brother to 'the builders of Hollywood: men like Jack Warner and Irving Thalberg.'[90] In an interview with *The Sunday Times* in 2013, Sam Houser likened the development of *GTAV* to the 'tumultuous production of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* [1979]'.[91] The androcentric, 'auteurist' reductionism of these references notwithstanding, this promotional rhetoric in which Rockstar relate themselves or their products to the

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[86] 'Rockstar Recommends: A Chronology of Favorite Movie Shootouts and Standoffs', *Rockstar Newswire*, 20 February 2012, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/20741/rockstar-recommends-a-chronology-of-favorite-movie-shootouts-and.html [accessed 20 March 2017].

[87] The cinematic-satisfaction of games like *Max Payne 3* is remarked upon in Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 139; Murray, *On Video Games*, 184-196 especially.

[88] See for example Houser quoted in Walla, '*Red Dead Redemption*'s Cinematic Ancestors'.

[89] 'Rockstar Games awarded Academy Fellowship | BAFTA Games Awards 2014', uploaded 15 March 2014, by THE ROCKSTAR FANBOY, *YouTube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6j3GB3H7f4 [accessed June 10, 2017].

[90] 'Rockstar Games awarded Academy Fellowship.'

[91] The interviewer at several points in the article likens either Rockstar's influence or Sam Houser himself to Quentin Tarantino, and also referred to the fact that Houser 'sports a beard that comes and goes, but today it's long enough to make him look like a young Stanley Kubrick'. See Utichi, 'The Biggest Entertainment Release Ever?'

Hollywood studio system (and the 'New Hollywood' that followed it) consciously attempts to draw on its established prestige.

Even the journalistic and academic discourses that surround Rockstar cannot help but read their output and brand operation in cinema-industrial terms. In the way that the company operate, comparisons have been made to film distribution companies: 'From a business perspective, Rockstar operates much like Miramax, buying up rights to properties from independent developers and selling them on the strength of its brand identity,' that '[a]s a publisher, Rockstar promotes, packages, and publicizes these properties.'[92] Moreover as early as 2003, when only *GTA: Vice City* had been released, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter noted that in their marketing strategies, Rockstar were actively 'replicating the Hollywood marketing model: [licensing music for] soundtracks, product tie-ins, and media events',[93] and in doing so, aiming to cultivate a brand image as being 'cool as fuck'.[94] Building on and incorporating pre-established popular culture in both creating games and running their business, Rockstar suggest a symbiotic relationship between the brand and the cultural industry that so inspired them. Though likely intended partly as a strategy to limit risk, this brand identity is also sustained by critics and academics.

Indeed, Rockstar's operation bears a striking resemblance to the Hollywood system (whether 'Golden Age' or late twentieth century), in which studios like Warner Brothers maintained distinct house styles, while simultaneously cultivating individual franchises.[95] Yet while the 'Golden Age' system Rockstar emulate might indeed be remembered popularly as dominated by 'Jack Warners' and 'Irvine Thalbergs', film historians have more recently argued that these studios could (and did) make films aimed at women,[96] and afforded professional opportunities to them at all levels.[97] As well as a perversion of the intricacies of the system itself, to use this image as currency is also a

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[92] Hill, 'Why Rockstar Games Rule'.
[93] Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, 234.
[94] While the original article referenced cannot be found, this quote is attributed to Rockstar's 'CEO' (presumably either Sam or Dan Houser), in Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, 236.
[95] See Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998); See also Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*.
[96] See for example Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
[97] See for example J. E. Smyth, *Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women Who Ran Hollywood* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Similarly, we might also call attention to the fact that there is now a growing recognition of the fact that the game industry has always involved women at its very core, though their history is often erased. See for example Carly A. Kocurek, 'Ronnie, Millie, Lila– Women's History for Games: A Manifesto and a Way Forward', *The American Journal of Play* 10, no. 1 (2017): 52–72.

distortion of cinema history – albeit, a useful one given Rockstar's proclivity for engaging in representations of American masculinity.

Masculinity

Transposition of these industrial logics to the games industry has created a distinct subversion of the system Rockstar aim to mimic, especially in terms of power structures and audience expectations. The games industry had (until recently) catered and marketed itself to an imagined audience of young men, despite official statistics offering a different picture of the game-playing audience.[98] As a result, scholars have read the industry's output as offering what they term 'the hegemony of play', wherein decisions about what games are made, and who they are made *for*, is controlled by an industry elite comprised mainly of men, who are predominantly white.[99] Given this context, that masculinity should be the chief preoccupation of Rockstar's titles is hardly surprising.

Rockstar's titles predominantly offer the chance to transgress social and legal boundaries, and offer apparent freedom of exploration, choice, and action in fully realised, recognisable but 'hybridised'[100] American spaces, while following and advancing the story of particular male characters. These characters are specifically designed by Rockstar to be the nexus around which the entire game experience and narrative operates. As Dan Houser noted, 'for us, it starts with the characters […] the story is always driven by the characters – it's always got to feel like someone you want to be propelled through the game world with.'[101] These playable protagonists are always men, and mostly (but not always) white Americans. They are constructed via references to or reworkings of the

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[98] Leigh Alexander, for example, describing the current 'homogenous' nature of the game industries output, argues that the industry itself is 'labouring under a date marketing vision that still dreams of the seventeen- to twenty-five-year-old gadget geek with the bottomless wallet, hasn't grown up at the same rate.' See Leigh Alexander, 'Playing Outside', in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 58; See also Alison Harvey, *Gender, Age, and Digital Games in the Domestic Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Tracey Lien, 'No Girls Allowed'. This assumed 'niche' audience is not reflected by data on the actual gender split of those playing games, which has fluctuated at figures between or below the 60/40 (male/female) and 50/50 mark for at least the last decade, according to reports by the Entertainment Software Association. For example, the figures for 2010 and 2011, when *RDR* and *LAN* were released, were 60/40 and 58/42 respectively. In recent years, this figure has been as high as 52/48 in 2014. Moreover, adult women have consistently represented a higher proportion of the gaming audience than boys under 18. See Entertainment Software Association, 'ESA Annual Report', *Entertainment Software Association,* http://www.theesa.com/about-esa/esa-annual-report/ [accessed 30 January 2019].

[99] Fron et al., 'The Hegemony of Play'.

[100] Bogost and Klainbaum, 'Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice City'.

[101] Keith Stuart, 'How Dan Houser Helped Turn *Grand Theft Auto* into a Cultural Phenomenon', *The Guardian*, 18 November 2012, sec. Media, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/nov/18/dan-houser-grand-theft-auto.

characteristics of other white male protagonists that have been created in contemporary film and television – especially in relationship to shows with certain prestige status in televisual-critical canon that revolve around the experiences of 'difficult' or 'hideous men'.[102] Moreover, usually these stories set out to interrogate the idea of the American Dream: 'What does [it] mean today?'[103] for Americans, but more specifically, for American men. On the one hand, it seems that Rockstar are making progressive moves in terms of LGBTQ representation in their games, despite their focus on men. Trevor Phillips, one of *GTAV*'s playable protagonists, is the only example of a bisexual lead character in any mainstream video game,[104] despite the fact he is depicted as psychopathic. Yet the *GTA* series has included 'jokes' and missions that are demonstrably homophobic and transphobic – another instance of Rockstar wanting to have their cake and eat it too.[105]

Moreover, there have been as yet no Rockstar games in which the experiences of women or being a woman in America is central to the story or gameplay. This was specifically addressed and then justified by Houser in an interview promoting the release of *GTAV*: claiming that 'The concept of being masculine was so key to this story'.[106] These video games therefore unavoidably offer a particular, often singular and marginalising view point onto American experiences, past and present.

This might be written-off as a creative decision and thematic focus of a developer that adheres to a strict brand identity and operate within the context of a broader 'hegemonic' games industry, if it were not complicated by the fact men outnumber women significantly in terms of executive creative and managerial positions at Rockstar.

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[102] This is particularly stark when considering, for example, the way that GTA V's protagonist option Michael De Santa bears a number of strong resemblances to Tony Soprano. As discussed elsewhere in Esther Wright, 'Rockstar Games' "Difficult Men": Contemporary Masculinity in Video Games and Television' (Society for Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference 2017, Chicago, IL, 2017); See also Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of A Creative Revolution, From The Sopranos and The Wire, to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (New York and London: Faber & Faber, 2013); Jason Mittell, 'Lengthy Interactions with Hideous Men: Walter White and the Serial Poetics of Television Anti-Heroes', in *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age*, ed. Roberta Pearson and Anthony N. Smith (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[103] 'What does the American Dream mean today?' is the tagline featured on the back of the physical packaging for *GTA IV*. For an examination of how the game allows players to experience 'a very modernist, dystopian version of the American Dream', see Adam W. Ruch, '*Grand Theft Auto IV:* Liberty City and Modernist Literature', *Games and Culture* 7, no. 5 (2012), 331-348.

[104] Adrienne Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem, 'Where Is the Queerness in Games? Types of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content in Digital Games', *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 3877–89; other LGBTQ characters in Rockstar games have been collated in the LGBTQ Video Game Archive. See https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/?s=rockstar [accessed 15 August 2018].

[105] Feminist Frequency, 'Can We Do Better Than Zelda? | Queer Tropes in Video Games', uploaded by FeministFrequency, 5 March 2019, *YouTube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&feature=youtu.be&v=_3FWnAT0pP8&app=desktop [accessed 5 March 2019]. See also Shaw and Friesem, 'Where is the Queerness in Games?'.

[106] See Hill, '*Grand Theft Auto V*: Meet Dan Houser, Architect of a Gaming Phenomenon'.

The company still remains in close-knit, thoroughly white-male control, with only 8% of 'the highest paid top quartile of employees at Rockstar' being women.[107] Rockstar were also implicated in a 2018 study into the gender pay gap in the UK games industry. In general, it was found that sixty-nine percent of companies with over 250 employees had a bigger pay gap than the UK national average, yet Rockstar North, the company's major UK studio and lead *GTA* developer, had the greatest pay gap between men and women in a games firm. Women therefore earn roughly '36p for every £1 a man earns'.[108] It is apparently male Rockstar staff that benefit most from the success of games like *GTAV*.[109] Moreover, numerous claims have been made about the workplace culture at Rockstar, which allegedly involved 'strip clubs, personal photography of employees in sexually compromising positions, and other conduct grossly in violation of standard workplace norms'. This material, it was also claimed, was often used to blackmail or silence former employees, generally too scared to speak out about their experiences.[110] If these accusations are to be believed, the games Rockstar create seem as fundamentally masculine as their corporate culture appears to be. Therefore, it serves us to question how this underlies Rockstar's overall brand of American history.

'Rockstar Games Presents…'

Time and again in promotional materials like developer-interviews and press releases, the same few senior executives speak for and about Rockstar's games on behalf of the company in general. Corporate documents published by Take-Two also suggest a kind of cult of executive leadership at Rockstar, and ascribe much of the developer's success (and the success of their parent company by extension) to their continued retention as assets.[111]

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[107] James Batchelor, '69% of Large UK Games Firms Have Bigger Gender Pay Gap than National Average', *Gamesindustry.Biz*, 5 April 2018, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/amp/2018-04-04-gender-pay-gaps-revealed-across-leading-uk-games-firms?__twitter_impression=true [accessed 4 April 2018].

[108] Figures taken from Ibid.

[109] For example, though Take-Two kept the particulars close to their chests, it was reported that creative talent and executives like Dan Houser, Art Director Aaron Garbut, and writers Mike Unsworth and Rupert Humphrey's were among those who 'are getting rewards over and above the appreciation of any stock they own.' As reported by Alan Farnham, '*Grand Theft Auto V* Making Shareholders, Creators Rich', *ABC News*, 20 September 2011, https://abcnews.go.com/Business/grand-theft-auto-videogame-making-people-rich/story?id=20308009 [accessed 31 July 2018].

[110] The allegations were made in the lawsuit between Leslie Benzies and Rockstar. See Campbell, 'The Great *Grand Theft Auto* Lawsuit Explained'.

[111] For example, Take-Two's annual reports for many years have stipulated that losing key Rockstar personnel is a 'Risk Factor' to their business: 'We are also highly dependent on the expertise, skills and knowledge of certain of our Rockstar employees and other key creative personnel responsible for content

Yet at the 2014 BAFTA Games awards, Rockstar became the first company as a whole to be awarded the annual fellowship, and in the acceptance speech Dan Houser consistently emphasised the 'we' of Rockstar over 'I'.[112]

Doing so perpetuates a wider issue within the industry. The labour of routinely hundreds if not thousands of staff for certain studios is more often than not 'obfuscated by the secrecy of the larger video companies, so we talk about the new game by "Ubisoft", or "EA" or "Rockstar"' – not referring to the individuals who make them but to the brands that sell them under their banner.[113] It is to these brands that 'fans are loyal': '[g]amers are allies to corporations', not to the multitudes of individual workers who operate at 'the bottom rung' of these companies.[114] This is actively perpetuated by the appearance, time and again, of certain individuals from companies like Rockstar in the press, or the consistent affirmation or reference to a 'we' of Rockstar that could never represent the actualities of workers' labour.[115]

Moreover, seeking to divert the focus from individual contributions to, and control over a game's development is unsurprising in this case for a company that has since its inception been hounded by successive waves of controversy, public and political condemnation, and multiple legal entanglements about what their games offer consumers. By presenting their titles as a product that 'Rockstar Games Presents', they shield individual executives from potential blame, shifting moral outrage and condemnation onto a wider, relatively impenetrable, public-facing brand identity.

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creation and development of our *Grand Theft Auto* titles and titles based on other brands. We may not be able to continue to retain these personnel at current compensation levels, or at all.' See Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., 'Annual Report 2018', 13 July 2018 [accessed 14 July 2018], 10.

112 This branding rhetoric is undercut by the fact Houser was accompanied on stage by only a select few of Rockstar's (white-male) executives: his brother, Benzies, Jeronimo Barrera and Aaron Garbut. Moreover, allegations in Benzies' lawsuit calls into question the seemingly noble desire for the company's executives to force the industry to have their hundreds of employees' efforts all recognised; i.e. the fact that Benzies fought for recognition of his alleged heroic efforts in saving multiple projects, while he claimed Sam and Dan Houser did little other than try and insert film references into early games. See Campbell, 'The Great *Grand Theft Auto* Lawsuit Explained'.

113 Brendan Keogh, 'Gamers and Managers vs Workers: The Impossible (and Gendered) Standards Imposed on Game Developers', *Overland*, 10 July 2018, https://overland.org.au/2018/07/gamers-and-managers-vs-workers-the-impossible-and-gendered-standards-imposed-on-game-developers/ [accessed 10 July 2018].

114 Ibid.

115 Nor does it account for the way workers within the games industry are often subjected to long periods of 'crunch time'. See for example Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, especially 35-68; Aside from the well-documented state of working conditions around the release of *LAN*, Rockstar have their own history of 'crunch culture', which resurfaced when *RDR2* was released in October 2018. See for example James Batchelor, 'Rockstar Has Been "Working 100-Hour Weeks" on Red Dead Redemption 2', *Gamesindustry.Biz*, 15 October 2018, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-10-15-rockstar-has-been-working-100-hour-weeks-on-red-dead-redemption-2; Jason Schreier, 'Inside Rockstar Games' Culture of Crunch'.

Creating an image of Rockstar-as-author also lends the company not only a particular sort of brand association with inherent qualities – cinematic, cultural, historical, or otherwise – but also commodifies a specific vision for consumption. This particular set of values might suggest a more personalised association with an 'authored' text, with values, a message, and meaning. This is especially important for Rockstar's deployment of a promotional discourse, which tries to encourage consumers to read or view their titles in a highly specific way. In other words, as Hadas notes,

> The author image as created in entryway paratexts instructs the audience as the 'correct' way to view, enjoy, and understand the [text], as well as the meanings they should look for and expect to find within. This kind of promotional authorship acts, to use a timely metaphor, as a set of 3-D glasses: it brings to the forefront certain elements in the text while pushing back and obscuring others.[116]

By attributing this kind of 'promotional authorship' to Rockstar as a whole – subsuming under this banner all the individual creatives who contribute to the game's development (writers, art and technical directors, executive producers, and so on) – a particular brand identity has been cultivated, seen to represent the fruits of a 'collective psyche' versed in cultural and social observation.[117] That is, Rockstar's games at once exist as individual titles or franchises in the company's portfolio, and as a product of a particular 'authorial' vision that is consistently doing very specific things with both American history and cultural memory. It is this vision that allows 'Rockstar' – and the executive individuals who speak to the press on the company's behalf – to perform the role of developer-historian, attempting to offer 'correct' or enhanced ways of consuming their games and understanding their meanings.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored Rockstar's multi-faceted branding and PR strategy, their adoption of broader media industrial logics, and how these brand values have been absorbed and reaffirmed by wider critical discourse. These values also perceptibly-manifest in the promotional paratexts Rockstar create explicitly for fan consumption.

Particular to the film industry, Paul Grainge argued that '[i]n a period when studios/companies compete for and seek to extend, presence in the global entertainment

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[116] Hadas, 'A New Vision', 49.
[117] Hill, '*Grand Theft Auto V*: Meet Dan Houser, Architect of a Gaming Phenomenon'.

market […] corporate logos have acquired a dynamic function in the cultural economy of filmed entertainment.'[118] That is, logos can have an 'emotive function', and a 'presupposition of an imaginative and somatic relationship with film, one that suggests "encounter" or that provides invitation to "enter a world"'.[119] While the 'R*' logo has been the longstanding signifier of the Rockstar brand, it has a dynamic relationship with specific games, in that the company's logos are adjusted to suit the genre or content of the specific game that they precede. For example, in the *Red Dead* series, the yellow Rockstar Games and purple Rockstar San Diego logos are featured on individual bullets in the chamber of a revolver, which turns and fires these branded rounds while 'Western' harmonica music plays. In *GTAV*, the yellow Rockstar and blue Rockstar North logos are accompanied by the sound of police sirens and gunshots, while the 'wanted' level (denoted by one to five white stars) gradually increases in the top left of the screen, which displays blurred footage of the flashing lights atop a police car. In *LAN*, the yellow Rockstar logo is emblazoned on a black and white film strip, accompanied by the sound of a projector whirring.

This is a practice also found in the promotional and textual components of Hollywood films. For example, in the context of *The Matrix* (1999-2003) and *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) franchises, the Warner Bros. shield is 'transformed' to suit the aesthetic of these individual films. As Grainge remarks, '[s]tudio logos have come to play a more pronounced role in the formal, stylistic and thematic unfolding of Hollywood trailers and credit sequences, inviting questions about not only the nature of corporate branding in post-classical Hollywood, but also how logos act upon, and can give meaning to, a film.'[120] Much as this provides more evidence of Rockstar's particular borrowing of Hollywood (here, acutely post-classical) conventions, it also says something similar about the consistent interaction of the Rockstar brand with their individual titles. Each time, the Rockstar logo claims ownership, authorship and brand identity, yet is moulded to fit the individual game's branding.

This maintenance of the Rockstar brand is also strongly communicated via paratextual materials designed to accompany their overtly historical games, intended to suggest a preliminary sense of historical authenticity and Rockstar's claim over it. For example, the Rockstar website hosts a series of desktop wallpapers and icons that fans of

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[118] Paul Grainge, 'Branding Hollywood: Studio Logos and the Aesthetics of Memory and Hype', *Screen* 45, no. 4 (2004): 346.
[119] Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, 16.
[120] Grainge, 'Branding Hollywood: Studio Logos and the Aesthetics of Memory and Hype', 346.

RDR can download. Each is created to imitate, but subtly subvert, 'authentic' period newspaper advertisements for various products, as if they were drawn from the very periodicals within the game's historical period. These promotional images are designed to have a quality of pastness, but they also contain traces of Rockstar's particular brand of 'mature' humour:

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 1. 'William Laggard's Guide to Manhood', downloadable wallpaper.[121]

[121] 'Downloads', *Red Dead Redemption official website*, http://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption/downloads [accessed 23 January 2018].

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 2. 'Sexing Livestock Quarterly'[122]

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 3. 'Wakefield & Bakeman Advanced Phosphate Baking Soda'.[123]

[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 4. 'English Imperial Elixir Tea'.[124]

Signifiers of Rockstar's brand identity are fused with the historicity of *RDR*'s period: masculinity (and how to perform it; *figure 1*), innuendo-laden adverts for fictionalised products – as are often found in *GTA*'s game worlds – that connote sex and/or drug use (*figures 2 & 3*), and Britishness as an intertextual engagement (*figure 4*).

Not only do we once again see the blurring of 'promotion' and (downloadable) 'content',[125] these materials appear to aptly embody the warnings about late capitalism of critics like Fredric Jameson: 'we are now, in other words, in "intertextuality" as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect and as the operator of a new connotation of "pastness" and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history.'[126] There is something indeed 'pseudohistorical' about the downloadable images that are meant to connote 'pastness', yet serve as extensions of the Rockstar brand. They are the kind of 'postmodern ad' that Boyle notes has 'become notorious for having layer upon layer of meaning and irony'.[127] On first glance, the content of these fake newspaper adverts might seem to connote historicity, selling products drawn from the period in which the game is set. Yet a knowing fan who understands their oeuvre and

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[124] Ibid.
[125] Grainge and Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries.*
[126] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 20; Linda Hutcheon makes the similar observation that in/after postmodernist art, history has come to be regarded and used as 'intertext'—that is, 'history' itself 'become a text, a discursive construct upon which fiction draws as easily as it does literature.' See Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 142.
[127] Boyle, *Authenticity*, 36.

signifiers might recognise them as something more, and 'get' the jokes that linger just below the surface – there for those who see them.

The ability to acquire 'authentic', Rockstar-branded elements from these historical games was also a feature of *LAN*'s promotion. The Rockstar Warehouse is a subsection of the company's official website from which fans can buy branded merchandise of all kinds: apparel, accessories, game guides and more. In the section for *LAN*, an item called the 'Parnell's Soup Can' was sold: a container disguised as a soup can in which the buyer could 'stash' items. Hidden inside however was an official Rockstar T-shirt emblazoned with the game's logo (*figure 5*). The item's description noted that it was a 'realistic soup can', and 'an extremely popular piece of evidence from our case files.' The soup can in question was featured in the game's downloadable bonus content case 'Reefer Madness', whereby employees of the Parnell Soup Co. used the cans to smuggle drugs into stores in Hollywood. Though it is unclear whether the implicit suggestion is being made that the purchaser can use the 'realistic' seeming can to do the same, it had a visible, taboo use in the game's 1947 Los Angeles.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 5. 'L.A. Noire Parnell's Soup Can Stash w/ Tee'. [128]

[128] Screenshot of Rockstar Warehouse website content, 'L.A. Noire Parnell's Soup Can Stash w/ Tee', taken 3 August 2018, *Rockstar Warehouse,* https://www.rockstarwarehouse.com/store/tk2rstar/en_GB/pd/productID.307061500#.

But as a physical manifestation of a piece of in-game material culture,[129] the creation of this soup can takes on another element of historicised meaning when we consider that elsewhere in *LAN's* marketing, Rockstar sought to emphasise that they had used an established Hollywood prop house to provide authentic period items, which were then designed in game as part of its 1947 setting.[130] Moreover, the Rockstar brand is literally here placed 'inside' a piece of merchandise, rather than selling this 'authentic' prop as a standalone item. Not only is it sold alongside merchandise for other Rockstar titles like *RDR, Max Payne 3,* and *GTA*, it is sold alongside explicitly Rockstar branded content. Once again, the significance of this item – implicitly 'historical' and 'historicised' in nature – is only able to exist in its association with and creation by Rockstar. Parnell's Soup Co. was never a real company, yet in creating an object with specific meaning and recognisability, Rockstar cannot help but remind players that they are behind its historical-fictional existence.

The justification for spending this much time surveying the components of Rockstar's brand identity in detail is because each of the above themes – outsider-ness, arbiters of American cultural and society history or satire, borrowing prestige and cultural capital from American cinema and popular culture, and a preoccupation with masculinity – are keenly felt not only in the games themselves, but also form a key aspect of their promotional strategies. In this sense, the way history is deployed textually *and* paratextually appears to be tangibly influenced by the perceptible core values of the Rockstar brand: placed front-and-centre in all of the above paratextual materials as a marker of authorship.

Boyle concludes that 'whatever the marketeers say about brands being the new soul, no brand or company is going to be able to survive in this climate' – where companies are routinely publicly shamed for appearing not to live up to their own hype – 'unless the gap between image and reality closes a little. Reputation just doesn't work unless it's real'.[131] Rockstar go to great lengths to prove that their claims to authenticity,

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[129] Two months before the release of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Rockstar released the 'Outlaw Essential Collection' via the Warehouse; a collection of items representative of material culture in the game's period, also branded with the Rockstar Games logo or *Red Dead Redemption 2*. See 'The Red Dead Redemption 2 Outlaw Essentials Collection', *Rockstar Newswire*, 30 August 2018, https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/60543/The-Red-Dead-Redemption-2-Outlaw-Essentials-Collection [accessed 30 August 2018].

[130] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part Three – Props', *Rockstar Newswire*, 2 February 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/13431/behind-the-scenes-of-la-noires-painstaking-production-design-par.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[131] Boyle, *Authenticity*, 39; Aronczyk similarly argues that because 'a brand is fundamentally undefined space [...] A brand's purpose is to create signifieds for itself on an ongoing basis, and to establish and manage relationships between itself and cultural elements or ideas.' See Aronczyk, 'Portal or Police?', 112.

and their promotional materials and other assorted paratexts are the sites at which they try to perform this most explicitly.[132] Rockstar go far beyond creating 'pseudohistorical' materials[133] in promotional materials that more directly address Rockstar's fanbase and potential players, which are specifically dedicated to claiming the historical authenticity of *RDR* and *LAN*.

[132] That brands can only every be a sum of their paratexts – that is, 'The value of the brand derives from the syntax, not the semantics' – is argued in Aronczyk, 'Portal or Police?', especially 113.
[133] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 20.

Chapter 2: Creating a Discourse of Historical Authenticity

> *'The True West series here at Rockstar Newswire will offer up, for the first time, just a bit of the historical insight unearthed and detailed by our internal Research department during the development of Red Dead Redemption to help ensure as authentic an experience as possible.'*
>
> – 'The True West – History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption'.[1]

> *'In L.A. Noire, virtually all of the cases you'll play are inspired in some part by real life incidents that happened in and around Los Angeles circa that crime-plagued era of 1947. Team Bondi meticulously researched stacks of original articles reported in the newspapers of the day to cull authentic elements of real life crimes that would inspire the in-game cases.'*
>
> – 'Real Crime Stories of 1947 Los Angeles That Inspired L.A. Noire Cases'.[2]

Early studies that sought to define video games as texts,[3] or works that considered the games industry and gaming culture,[4] proposed that academics should look beyond the content of individual games themselves. As Mia Consalvo put it, 'gameplay doesn't exist in a vacuum', and '[b]efore [players] even pick up a controller, their expectations are shaped to some degree about what to expect and what it means to play a game'.[5] Yet while consideration of marketing is often used in analyses of video games, gaming communities and culture, it is 'rarely […] a focal point'.[6] Scholarly attention to video game

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[1] 'The True West - History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption. Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part One: Frank James', *Rockstar Newswire*, 27 January 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2511/the-true-west-history-that-helped-inspire-red-dead-redemption-ba.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[2] '"The Red Lipstick Murder": Real Crime Stories of 1947 Los Angeles That Inspired L.A. Noire Cases', *Rockstar Newswire*, 11 March 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/14351/the-red-lipstick-murder-real-crime-stories-of-1947-los-angeles-t.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[3] Barry Atkins, *More than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games*.

[4] Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*; James Newman, *Videogames* (London: Routledge, 2004); Aphra Kerr, *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay* (London: SAGE, 2006); Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006); Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*; Randy Nichols, *The Video Game Business*, International Screen Industries (Basingstoke: Palgrave Mamillan, 2014); Matthew Thomas Payne and Gregory Steirer, 'Redesigning Game Industries Studies', *Creative Industries Journal* 7, no. 1 (2 January 2014): 67–71; T.L. Taylor, 'The Assemblage of Play', *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009): 331–39.

[5] Consalvo, *Cheating*, 176. See also Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter, *Digital Play*, for an early and still influential examination of video game marking, as a core site of meaning negotiation between game companies and players.

[6] Carl Therrien and Isabelle Lefebvre, 'Now You're Playing with Adverts: A Repertoire of Frames for the Historical Study of Game Culture through Marketing Discourse', *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2017).

promotional practices and other paratexts has only started to develop comparatively recently.[7] Moreover, although existing studies of historical video games often incorporate reference to materials outside of games themselves,[8] comparatively little work evaluates this framing content as a site of meaning-making.

This is less true for historical film and television. Some historians have read historical films as 'cultural sites where meaning is negotiated', even contested, by various agents: producers, marketers, critics, scholars, audiences, and beyond.[9] In terms of paratexts more specifically, Debra Ramsay argues that DVD bonus features and other materials physically packaged with historical films can be read as both serving to 'extend the pre-release promotional drives of the films', and 'involve the consumer in the construction of their historical and cultural worth.'[10] It is here argued that the same can be said of the promotional materials and assorted paratexts created for historical games. If we are to understand the way that historical periods, events, and/or processes are represented, we must look beyond the way these representations appear within texts themselves. What do these surrounding discourses – or to borrow Barbara Klinger's term,

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[7] See for example Matthew Thomas Payne, 'Marketing Military Realism in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*', *Games and Culture* 7, no. 4 (2012): 305–27; Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015); Mercé Oliva, Óliver Pérez-Latorre, and Reinald Besalu, 'Choose, Collect, Manage, Win!: Neoliberalism, Enterprising Culture and Risk Society in Video Game Covers', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 24 November 2016; Jan Švelch, '"Footage Not Representative": Redefining Paratextuality for the Analysis of Official Communication in the Video Game Industry', in *Contemporary Research on Intertextuality in Video Games*, ed. Christophe Duret and Christian-Marie Pons (Hershey, PA: IG Global, 2016), 297–315; Daniel Dunne, 'Paratext: The In-Between of Structure and Play', in *Contemporary Research on Intertextuality in Video Games*, ed. Christophe Duret and Christian-Marie Pons (Hershey, PA: IG Global, 2016), 274–96; and the first journal special issue dedicated specifically to video game promotion: Ed Vollans et al., '"Introduction: 'It's [Not Just] in the Game': The Promotional Context of Video Games"', *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2017).

[8] See for example Jeremiah McCall and Adam Chapman, 'The Debate Is on: Historical Accuracy in Historical Video Games (Part 2)'; Shaw, 'The Tyranny of Realism': 4–24; Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler, 'Controversies: Historicising the Computer Game', in *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*, 2007, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07312.51468.pdf; Emil Lundedal Hammar, 'Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*', *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 372–95; Tom Apperley, 'Counterfactual Communities: Strategy Games, Paratexts and the Player's Experience of History', *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2018).

[9] Eleftheria Thanouli, *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 6; citing Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 6-7.

[10] Debra Ramsay, 'Flagging up History: The Past as a DVD Bonus Feature', in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, ed. Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (Malden, MA and Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012), 55; Ramsay also argues similarly with respect to HBO's *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific* in Debra Ramsay, 'Television's "True Stories": Paratexts and the Promotion of HBO's Band of Brothers and The Pacific', *InMedia: The French Journal of Media and Media Representations in the English-Speaking World* 4 (2013), http://inmedia.revues.org/720.

a text's 'intertextual surround'[11] – tell us about how the industry views, and tries to sell, the representation of history in their titles?

Media scholars more broadly have long advocated the study of 'ancillary' or 'paratextual' materials, and how, in Martin Barker's words, 'all the circulating prior information, talk, images and debates generate and shape expectations which will influence' access to a text and shape its meanings.[12] While 'paratext' was conceptualised initially as a literary term by Gerard Genette,[13] for media scholars it has become something of a catchall term for material that surrounds a media product: industry-generated hype and branded communication, promotional materials such as reviews, box art and posters, special features and making of documentaries, or viewer-created content like wikis and other fandom-generated materials.[14]

Influential contemporary paratext scholar Jonathan Gray argues that these different kinds of textual 'proliferations' might be 'our first and formative encounters' with a media product, and therefore have the potential to shape meaning for an audience before, during, or after their viewing (or indeed, playing) of a hierarchically-defined main text.[15] Marketing materials and promos have the potential to 'shape the reading strategies that we will take with us "into" the text, and […] provide the all-important early frames through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption'– whether the audience eventually 'resists' these meanings or not.[16] With the amount of time and money companies plough into advertising their forthcoming products, we should expect that there is 'nothing random or accidental about the meanings on offer in Hollywood's trailers, posters, previews, and ad campaigns'.[17] They 'promis[e] value' which can be attained by consumers who choose a specific product and 'buy into' the hype.[18]

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[11] Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 72.
[12] Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials'; Barker, 'Speaking of "Paratexts": A Theoretical Revisitation'.
[13] Genette, *Paratexts*.
[14] Barker, 'Speaking of "Paratexts": A Theoretical Revisitation', 235; Where specific to games we can include fan forums, Let's Play videos or other YouTube content and mods. See Apperley, 'Counterfactual Communities'; Mia Consalvo, 'When Paratexts Become Texts: De-Centering the Game-as-Text', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (2017): 177–83; Sun-ha Hong, 'When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games' Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual', *Games and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2015): 35–56.
[15] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 3.
[16] Ibid., 26; 34, Jonathan Gray, 'Television Pre-Views and the Meaning of Hype', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (2008): 33–49.
[17] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 47–48.
[18] Gray, 'Television Pre-Views', 36.

There are two key aspects of the existing literature on promotion and paratexts that have direct implications for the study of historical games, and Rockstar as a case study. Firstly, that these materials attempt to preload players with certain information before their experience of the games themselves. That is, these sources of information are what Gray terms 'entryway paratexts'– materials which are designed to 'grab the viewer before he or she reaches the text and try to control the viewer's entrance to the text.'[19] Jason Mittell alternately terms these materials 'orienting paratexts', grouping together materials created by the industry to promote their titles, as well as those created by fans themselves. As Mittell outlines, the internet works as a 'highly accessible paratextual realm' to which 'creators can outsource backstory and cultural references […] paratextual resources designed specifically to help orient viewers'[20] – or here, players – to the potential meanings contained within the media product they precede, accompany, or follow. Such theoretical designations of the internet's function as 'paratextual realm' are of particular use in the discussion Rockstar below, particularly given their decision to author and publish 'orienting' or 'entryway' paratexts on their official website. By directing readers to other online resources (namely Wikipedia, YouTube, and Archive.org), Rockstar offer fragments of information intended to prefigure a player's gameplay experience toward certain meanings and interpretations: namely, its authentic qualities.

These materials consequently create what Klinger termed a 'consumable identity'.[21] They foster player recognition of specific in-game elements as something of value, 'fetishizing'[22] and commodifying the ways in which Rockstar have included various intertextual references, arguably intending to 'pry open the insularity of the text as object and to disperse it into an assortment of capitalizable elements'.[23] In Klinger's words, '[t]he goal of promotion is to produce multiple avenues of access to the text that will make [it] resonate as extensively as possible […] in order to maximise its audience'.[24] But as Gray notes, media paratexts – like those considered here – can be read as 'not only forms of intertextuality, but they can control the menu of intertexts that audiences will consult or employ when watching or thinking about a text.'[25] In this sense, these paratextual

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[19] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 23.
[20] Mittell, *Complex TV*, 262.
[21] Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture', *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 4 (1989): 3–19.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 13–14.
[24] Ibid., 10.
[25] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 141.

materials at once attempt to draw in a range of potential players, while simultaneously 'policing' the boundaries of a player's 'interpretive agency'.[26]

The second relevant aspect of the existing literature is work that explores this material's 'performative' nature.[27] The performance of the Rockstar brand is tangible within these materials, often as a direct means of company to fan communication, aiming to communicate certain Rockstar-approved values. The tone of these paratexts is, it is argued, an apt reflection of early film advertising. As Janet Staiger observed, historically such marketing aimed not just to sell products, but communicated value(s) and 'ideals' to sell an experience. Studying these materials can therefore tell us much about how the industry positions itself.[28]

The performative aspects of this official communication are moreover overt attempts by Rockstar to embody the role of developer-historian, thereby lending themselves the authority and legitimacy to sell their brand of history. Not specific to Rockstar, the marketing and advertising campaigns surrounding the release of most historical games actively stake a claim for the historical research that went into creating them. Representatives of their respective developers and/or publishers often perform this role by discussing the 'real' context and content of the game, and their intention to create an authentic or accurate historical representation, as subjective and ever-changing as these terms are. This is particularly necessary since the performance of authenticity 'requires an audience', and any judgement for or against it 'is in the eye of the beholder.'[29]

We can thus explore what kinds of 'diegetic frames'[30] Rockstar create in their marketing strategies. What information do they foreground about the themes, characters,

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[26] Aroncyzk, 'Portal or Police?', 112.

[27] Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials'; See also Aronczyk, 'Portal or Police?'.

[28] In making this argument Staiger cited the words of Harold B. Franklin in 1930: that '[o]verall, the objective of film advertising is, as one writer in 1930 phrased it, that it "not merely announces our wares, it not merely wins us patrons, but it voices and interprets our ideals"". See 'Janet Staiger, 'Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising', *Cinema Journal* 29, no. 3 (1990): 4.

[29] Barbara Cueto and Bas Hendrikx, 'Introduction', in *Authenticity? Observations and Artistic Strategies in the Post-Digital Age*, ed. Barbara Cueto and Bas Hendrikx (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 12.

[30] Therrien and Lefebvre use this term to describe how adverts 'highlight desirable elements that are directly related to the game world'. Therrien and Lefebvre, 'Now You're Playing with Adverts'. We can also consider the 'communicative situation' in which the texts have been intentionally placed by their creator(s). Defined by Franceso Casetti in his work on adaptation, this 'involves the presence of a text, a series of elements that guarantee the communicative interaction (interactional frame), a set of institutionalized rules and manners (institutional frame), a series of background discourses (intertextual frame), and a set of personal and collective experiences that operate as a reference (existential frame) […] Calling attention to the communicative situation does not just imply considering a text and its surroundings, but, more importantly, it means dealing with the relationship between these elements and the way in which they, together, bend the text one way or another.' Francesco Casetti, 'Adaptation and Mis-Adaptations: Film,

setting, and ultimately, the narrative and gameplay experience the games offer? There appears to be two dominant 'frames' within Rockstar's promotion of their historical games.[31] Firstly, blog posts and other sites of performative communication seek to generate a *discourse of historical authenticity* around and before their release. This aims to solicit potential player recognition that their substance and affordances are embedded in or based on historical fact. These materials provide 'evidence' intended to encourage the perception of historicity. The second interconnected category for analysis here is promotional material that seeks to generate a *discourse of cinematic authenticity* around the release of Rockstar's games.[32] Drawing on the prestige of cinema and critically-popular cultural genres, as well as images of the past pre-established within them, Rockstar create their own version of what constitutes an 'authentic' Western or *noir*; specifically privileging the select qualities that their games aim to capture or represent.

Given that explicitly *historical* video games are the focus of this study, referring to these materials as individual 'paratexts' risks losing sight of what is at stake in these discursive practices. Constructed and published by Rockstar, this online content ultimately serves as the games' *historiographic*, as well as promotional surround. The way Rockstar, through their promotional materials, engage the history and culture that precede the games, and the details featured in the new historical narratives they create, reveals certain attitudes towards and arguments about America's past. They are indicative of certain choices, and these choices have a perceptible influence on the historical content of the games themselves, as will be later explored.

It becomes clear that in creating these promotional discourses Rockstar are not only attempting to create 'hype', but are moreover aiming to set the very standards by which their games should be received as authentic, both historically and culturally. These paratexts are intended to preload potential consumers with intertextual reference points, creating a pre-legitimated identity for the games' historical and cultural representations. As Gray summarises, 'much of the media's powers come not necessarily from being able to tell us what to think, but what to think about, and how to think about it.'[33] The

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Literature, and Social Discourses', in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 81–91.

[31] We may also here consider Ervine Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974), as explored by Chapman and Linderoth, as another way of conceptualising of the way historical video games are 'framed' by their paratexts. See Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games', in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, ed. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley ML Brown (New York, NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 137–53.

[32] Wright, 'Marketing Authenticity'.

[33] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 3.

following two chapters explore what it is that Rockstar tried to tell potential players *to think about* in relation to the historical and cinematic foundations of their games. This chapter begins by arguing that Rockstar not only try and generate a 'field of historicality'[34] around their games before release, but doing so feeds into trends of promotional discourse surrounding historical popular culture dating back to early Hollywood.

The 'True West' and 'Real Crimes'

The promotional cycles for both *RDR* and *LAN* began roughly a year before their release.[35] Aside from exclusives that were featured in the gaming and entertainment news press (which will be discussed in later chapters), Rockstar created their own content to frame and historicise their forthcoming products, hosted on the Rockstar *Newswire*. As a site of direct company-to-fan communication, the *Newswire* is a specific section of Rockstar's official website. Posting official updates on forthcoming releases and game-related news, the blog is also used to collate and signpost toward fan interactions with Rockstar products: fan art, fan-created videos on YouTube, and more, as well as directing attention toward Rockstar-related events and wider media content. As well hosting these blog posts on the main *Newswire* site, game-specific posts are filtered down and hosted under the 'news' sections of individual official game websites, such as that for *RDR* and *LAN*, suggesting that Rockstar see this as a direct, official channel for communication with fans. In these posts, there is a clear attempt at pre-empting the reception of historical authenticity, positioning their content as legitimate even before the possibility for players to judge for themselves.

As noted above, the paratextual promotion of historical authenticity is not specific to the medium of video games, but rather is a long-held practice of cinematic publicity. As Vivian Sobchack found through analysis of the 'advertising rhetoric' of the Hollywood historical film, evocations of 'surge and splendour' abound.[36] In many reviews of these early- to mid-twentieth century historical epics, 'one generally finds praise not for [a film's] historical accuracy or specificity but rather for its extravagant generality and excess—of sets, costumes, stars, and spectacle, of the money and labor that went into the

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[34] Vivian Sobchack, '"Surge and Splendor": A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic', *Representations*, no. 29 (1990): 24–49.
[35] That is, specifically their release to U.S. and European markets.
[36] Sobchack, 'Surge and Splendor', 27.

making of such entertainment.'[37] As Sobchack notes, '[t]he end goal is authenticity, a word appearing frequently throughout the text in reference to-and equating- both the filmmakers' and spectators' experience of the production as "truly" historical.'[38] Similarly George Custen, overviewing the marketing of classical Hollywood biopics as historical films, noted that

> The intensity of the research effort expended on a project was part of the publicity campaigns for many biopics […] Extravagant research efforts became, for the biopic, a way of reassuring consumers that every effort has been expended to bring them true history in the guise of spectacle, as well as suggesting that the research for each film was, for the first time, bringing to the screen a true portrait, or at least a singularly true version or the accurate characterization of a person.[39]

Ramsay counters the suggestion that the emphasis on research in marketing is 'merely another marketing trope' by proposing that this 'overlook[s]' the potential of marketing paratexts 'for illuminating the ways in which film imposes order on the past and creates meaningful histories.'[40] While this is indeed a valid counterpoint to a reductionist view of such marketing strategies as 'just hype' or 'spin', Ramsay's perspective takes an optimistic view of the construction of history in cinema (and its paratexts), and to an extent therefore inadvertently overlooks the fact that these paratexts can *disguise*, as well as illuminate. That is, these paratexts, as sites of meaning-making, might encourage viewers (or indeed, players) to look favourably on the way those who themselves have created these 'behind the scenes' features have created historical representations from their own selection and interpretation of source material.[41] Thus while we would be wrong to dismiss the 'marketing [of] research', to adapt Custen's phrase,[42] as just empty hype, we should also be wary of assessing mitigating political and ideological implications that may otherwise impact the 'meaningful histories' which are (undoubtedly, of course) created

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[37] Ibid., 28.
[38] Ibid., 31.
[39] George F. Custen, 'Making History', in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (London: Athlone Press, 2001), 69; Wider discussions of the relationship between Hollywood film and History, and the role of research in both production and promotion are found in, for example, Phillip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 147–99; J.E. Smyth, *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: From Cimarron to Citizen Kane* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006); Thanouli, *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines*, 71–77.
[40] Ramsay, 'Flagging up History: The Past as a DVD Bonus Feature', 62.
[41] By this, I mean to acknowledge that any number of stakeholders in the production of a media text can seek out this kind of reception: director, producer, actor, studio, and so on.
[42] Custen, 'Making History', 69.

by visual media, which promotional materials – and the selling of research-equals-truth – may conceal.[43]

Indeed, Adrienne Shaw makes this point specific to the marketing of another historical video game, *Assassin's Creed III* (2012). As Shaw notes, references to the 'production process', and how historical research formed a part of it, 'indicates how authenticity is constructed in media industries' – exposing choices taken that supposedly 'allow the game to "feel right"'.[44] But there is another potential function to this kind of historicised promotional discourse. Such marketing materials often attempt to 'preempt critiques' a game may face in critical or popular discourse for the way it represents past events and/or people.[45]

Nonetheless, there appears to be little difference between the emphasis on research currency and authenticity in the promotion of historical films and historical video games, and particularly here, *RDR* and *LAN*. There are two different ways in which individual *Newswire* posts attempted to generate a discourse of historical authenticity around the release of these games: firstly, by claiming that the main narrative themes and character types included in the games were authentic to the periods in which the games were set. Secondly, and interrelatedly, posts sought to position Rockstar in the role of the developer-historian by emphasising the labour that the company undertook in researching and subsequently digitally recreating these historical periods – especially their material culture.

Indeed, as illustrated by this chapter's epigraph, explicit gestures to authenticity appear frequently. *RDR* was promoted, before and after its release, by blog posts under the heading 'The True West – History that Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption'. To begin with, the overt evocation of 'truth' and 'history' tries to add the weight of legitimacy and historicity (and indeed, authenticity) to this historical fiction. Yet this also implicitly reveals Rockstar's representation of history as discursive and inherently interpreted, not offering access to 'the real', as they claim. As Hayden White noted, any reference to history that is deemed 'true', has only been made so by creating an artificial narrative that 'wears the mask of a meaning'.[46] These pieces of historical content then are the 'plot' points, as White referred to them,[47] that allow Rockstar to weave an historical narrative

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[43] Ramsay, 'Flagging up History: The Past as a DVD Bonus Feature', 62.
[44] Shaw, 'The Tyranny of Realism', 12.
[45] Ibid.
[46] White, 'The Value of Narrativity', 24.
[47] Ibid.

that they present (and commodify) as true, suggesting that *their* representation *of this truth* is authentic.

In *RDR*'s case, the very first 'True West' post laid bare the specific aims of the blog series: Rockstar would be providing players with 'just a bit of historical insight' into what had been 'unearthed and detailed by our internal Research department' while developing the game.[48] This position is mirrored in press interviews where Rockstar representatives like Ted Carson (Technical Director) described the way the team 'did plenty of real-world research, from visiting the Library of Congress to road trips to photographing real environments.'[49] On the one hand, it seems that Rockstar's 'philosophy of history'[50] is to suggest the objectivist, rational approach to historical research and writing ('unearthed'), complementing the epistemology of the game's simulation style noted in the introduction. Yet that Rockstar here look to foreground their own ('internal') control over this material, and thus directly embody the developer-historian role, is of note. It again suggests that this history is deliberately constructed and controlled – by those within it who make certain overarching, directorial and authorial decisions – to ensure that it conforms to the Rockstar brand, with little apparent outside influence from professional historians or other researchers. There is a personal touch in the labour and selection of these 'intriguing true touchstones', and a Rockstar vision that is communicated. All of this is offered as proof that Rockstar laboured to 'help ensure as authentic an experience as possible.'[51] Once again however, the labour of perhaps tens, if not hundreds of individuals, is masked by the suggestion of a discrete 'Rockstar' vision.

Furthermore, in the first of these posts we are also given significant indication that the image of Western history Rockstar are keen to project to potential players as *their interpretation* of the 'True West', conforms to a particular attitude of Western 'revisionism', most apparent in the canonical androcentric Western films produced in the late-1960s and 1970s: 'What tends to get lost in the romanticism of the era's wild steeds, picturesque plains, dusty saloons and tumbleweeds – is the abject savagery and treacherousness of the West – and particularly in those twilight years.'[52] Why this poses issues will be returned to in chapter three. Furthermore, Rockstar claim that '[u]nlike the pure fantasy of most

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[48] 'Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part One: Frank James'.
[49] See Gamespot Staff, '*Red Dead Redemption* Exclusive Q&A', *Gamespot*, 10 February 2010, http://www.gamespot.com/articles/red-dead-redemption-exclusive-qanda/1100-6249985/ [accessed 10 March 2016].
[50] Klein, *Frontiers of the Historical Imagination*, 6.
[51] 'Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part One: Frank James'.
[52] Ibid.

videogames, the conditions that amount to [*RDR*'s] backstory – changed man, former outlaw John Marston being strong-armed back into a life of violence by a desperate and underhanded government agency – are very *real*.'[53] They are of course only 'real' or 'true' in the version of historic events that Rockstar here promote, from the raw materials of 'the past' that have been deliberately chosen and moulded.

One of two subseries of 'True West' posts sought to historically authenticate one of the game's main themes, and the characterisation of Marston as playable protagonist: the redemption (or lack, thereof) of the outlaw, or as the posts framed it, 'Bad Guys Gone Good… And Vice Versa.' The construction of Marston as a 'bad guy gone good' (or at least, *attempting* to go good, as per Rockstar's long-held proclivity for writing stories around these sorts of protagonists) is authenticated by the inclusion of facts about 'real' Western characters who conform the same archetype. 'Truth' and authenticity are therefore sold as inextricable from Marston's origins, as the man that players will be 'propelled through the game world' with,[54] despite being a fictionalised character.

Featured are Frank James, who renounced his outlaw ways after his infamous brother Jesse's death,[55] Pearl Hart,[56] a young woman who turned outlaw, and Tom Horn, at various points a Pinkerton agent, hired gunman, and cowboy vigilante.[57] The fact that this 'truth' is supported by characters like James, Hart, and Horn is of note: though they were 'real' historical people, they are also intrinsic parts of Western mythology. What they represent has already been crystallised via repeated mythical representations in dime novels, popular literature, serials, film and television. The reference here is to previous representations of real people, not only as themselves but invoking the cultural currency of their function as outlaws or vigilantes that support the kind of 'treacherous' and 'savage' portrait of the American West Rockstar seek to present.

The exclusive mention of only individual (violent) figures reveals another attitude in Rockstar's historiographical agenda – namely the lack of reference to the textures of families, kinship networks, and other quasi-familial groups who actually made the West

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[53] Ibid, emphasis mine.
[54] Dan Houser in Stuart, 'How Dan Houser Helped Turn *Grand Theft Auto* into a Cultural Phenomenon'.
[55] 'Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part One: Frank James'.
[56] 'Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part Two: Pearl Hart (The True West: History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption', *Rockstar Newswire*, 12 February 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2951/bad-guys-gone-good-and-vice-versa-part-two-pearl-hart-the-true-w.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
[57] 'Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part Three: Tom Horn (The True West - History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption)', *Rockstar Newswire*, 5 March 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/3461/bad-guys-gone-good-and-vice-versa-part-three-tom-horn-the-true-w.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

and occupied its spaces. Though perhaps not canonical, there is hardly a vacuum of historiographic and cultural representations of domesticity, broadly defined, in the American West. Many Western texts (not least those written by women) indeed focused on domestic life, and Western spaces in which gender roles were more fluid than a masculine/feminine binary.[58] In addition to the Marston-centric narrative of the game itself, these promotional materials reveal Rockstar's continuation of long-standing myths of Western culture and literature, especially that of the individual's existence outside of the community, and the white male hero's flight from domesticity and into 'the West' to find and make himself.[59]

Other posts in the 'True West' series are thematically arranged to detail 'historical' evidence or communicate wider processes of change and development, all of which play some role in historicising and authenticating aspects of *RDR*'s gameplay options or wider narrative arc: for example, new developments in patent medicine and drugs,[60] 'Western weaponry',[61] the extension of federal law and government influence,[62] and new inventions and devices to enable national communication.[63] These posts are peppered with references to historical events and figures, offering relatively meticulous (if selective) details about certain themes or issues which indeed amount to (albeit basic) historiographical interpretations. For example, the first of these posts to discuss materiality rather than historical figures claims that the game offers actual access to some of the technical innovations whose presence would have been felt in this period. The

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[58] See for example Cathryn Halverson, *Playing House in the American West: Western Women's Life Narratives, 1839-1987* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2013); Amy Kaplan, 'Manifest Domesticity', *Western American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 581–606; Janis P. Stout, *Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Austin and Cather* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007).

[59] This argument was first put forward by Leslie A. Fielder, *The Return of the Vanishing America* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) The fact that Marston's story literally sees his 'flight' from his family (albeit unwillingly) to (re)make himself in Rockstar's fictionalised Western space is indeed interesting in this context.

[60] 'The True West - History That Inspired Red Dead Redemption: Patent Medicines, Drink and Drugs', *Rockstar Newswire*, 17 September 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/7081/the-true-west-history-that-inspired-red-dead-redemption-patent-m.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[61] 'Western Weaponry of the Early 20th Century (The True West - History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption)', *Rockstar Newswire*, 4 June 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/5421/western-weaponry-of-the-early-20th-century-the-true-west-history.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[62] 'A New National Order: The Power of Federal Law Emerges in Early 20th Century America (The True West - History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption)', *Rockstar Newswire*, 18 June 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/6291/a-new-national-order-the-power-of-federal-law-emerges-in-early-2.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[63] 'New Inventions Sweep the Nation - Part One: Communication, Devices and More (The True West - History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption)', *Rockstar Newswire*, 27 April 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/4241/new-inventions-sweep-the-nation-part-one-communication-devices-a.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

work of '*our* [Rockstar's internal] Research department' enabled the 'authentic' inclusion of binoculars, candlestick telephones, and of-the-period advertisements in newspapers and shop windows, as just a sample of some of those historical features to which Rockstar had paid '[m]eticulous attention to ensure both domestic life and local commerce in the game reflect the latest inventions and items in popular use.'[64]

In all of these posts, in-game captures of characters, weapons, or scenes are laid alongside 'real' historical images and photographs (*figures 6 and 7*), in the same way Sobchack describes in her survey of promotional materials: 'In between the lengthier portions of text that equate and apotheosize both *the history of production* and the *production of history* (and imply their reversibility) are sections organized around photographs.'[65] Moreover, Ramsay argues that while much of the material packaged with historical films clearly serves a promotional function (in this case, DVD extras), these materials 'also strategically place the films within an array of specific historical texts.'[66]

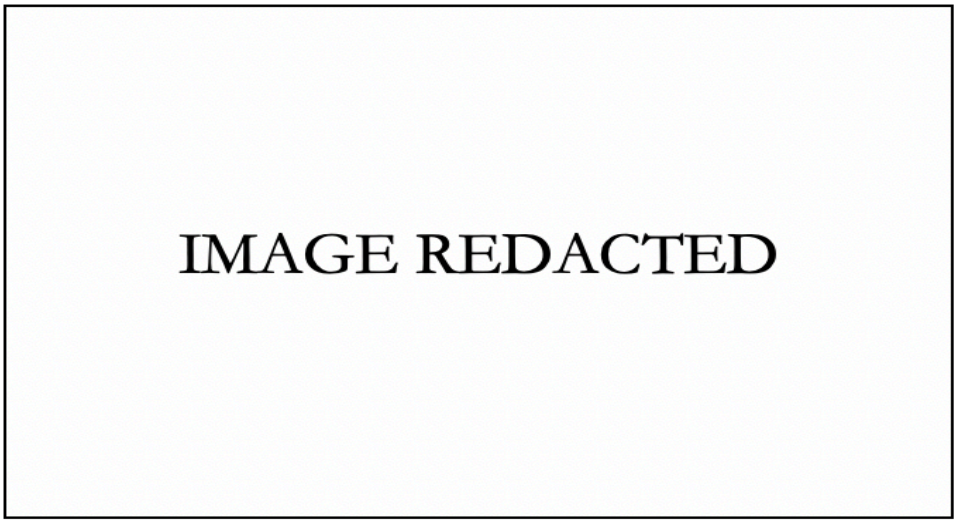

Figure 6. `Western Weaponry' Newswire post.[67]

[64] 'New Inventions Sweep the Nation - Part One: Communication, Devices and More (The True West - History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption)', emphasis mine.
[65] Sobchack, 'Surge and Splendor', 31 Emphasis in original.
[66] Ramsay, 'Flagging up History: The Past as a DVD Bonus Feature', 58.
[67] 'Western Weaponry of the Early 20th Century (The True West - History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption)'.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 7. 'New Inventions Sweep the Nation' Newswire post.[68]

In these images we see Rockstar displaying their (re)production of history in *RDR*, and indeed, 'strategically' positioning these in-game frames against 'real' historical evidence.

Looking beyond these *Newswire* posts, Rockstar's attempt at situating *RDR* historically elsewhere in the game's paratextual surround further indicates their historiographical attitudes. The game's tagline – featured on both internet sources and box art – declared that in 1911 the 'Wild West is Dying'. When Frederick Jackson Turner declared the Frontier 'closed' two decades earlier, it was because census data suggested that 'settlement had become so dense.'[69] Woodrow Wilson lamented the loss of the Frontier in 1895, and the new 'fixed order of life' left in its wake.[70] Without wishing to be pedantic about historical accuracy – for which Rockstar clearly have little regard – the 'Wild West' could hardly have still been 'dying' in 1911. By 1900, roughly half the population lived in urban settlements, towns or cities.[71] In the 1890s the changes that *RDR* dedicates much (textual and paratextual) energy to chronicle – technological and industrial advance, concentrations of wealth, new waves of immigration, and urbanization

[68] 'New Inventions Sweep the Nation - Part One: Communication, Devices and More (The True West - History That Helped Inspire Red Dead Redemption)'.
[69] Nash, *Creating the West*, 3; Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History'.
[70] Cited in Nash, *Creating the West*, 8–9.
[71] Writing around the same time that Limerick lamented the lack of influence of the New Western History, Gerald Nash similarly declared that the image of 'the West' that dominated popular consciousness between 1890 and 1990 was that of 'a sparsely settled region, characterized by mining, livestock, and agriculture. Its symbolic figures were the miner, the cattleman, and the rancher, and–above all–the cowboy.' While over the course of the century historians began to write about the fact that even in the 19th Century the West 'was dominated by towns and cities' hosting a wider variety of characters, this did little to displace widespread images. However, Nash made a prediction that now seems hopelessly naïve: 'If by 1990 the new image had not displaced the old, that of the cowboy West, in the twenty-first century it was bound to force itself on the consciousness of the majority of Americans'. See ibid, 195. Nash, *Creating the West*, 159.

– were already underway.[72] *RDR* reflects a nostalgia for a time that was felt more acutely by historians of Turner's generation who experienced that change themselves. Instead, Rockstar's lament for the 'death of the old West' is really a eulogy for a particular kind of Western, as will be explored in chapter three.

This focus on individual outlaws, technologies, weapons, and processes hardly illustrates the 'real' West. Reducing vast and complex historical processes into their own easily-digestible chunks might offer some texture that hints toward 'these first early days of modern consumer capitalism',[73] or the development of law enforcement in the Progressive era.[74] But the 'authentic' reproduction of material culture and inclusion of a handful of characters as a substitute for wider processes and issues, is hardly a substitute for documenting the experiences of communities or individuals. Rather, it offers 'historical insight' and historiographical assessments only insofar as is relevant to sell *RDR*'s brand of Western history.

L.A. Noire's 'Real Crime Stories'

This attempt at creating a discourse of historical authenticity also appears in the blog posts that preceded the release of *LAN*. Like the 'True West' posts that gave information on the exploits of infamous Westerners, posts under the heading 'Real Crime Stories of 1947 Los Angeles that inspired L.A. Noire Cases' cited and summarised newspaper stories and reports on incidents involving Los Angeles residents in the late 1940s. The effect of such is seemingly twofold: on the one hand, using documented crimes as the underpinning for *LAN*'s cases, and surrounding promotional discourses, is in keeping with the inherently 'ripped from the headlines' nature of *noir* storytelling in general.[75] On the other hand, it also provides legitimation and a sense of historical authenticity for the gameplay actions and criminal investigations players will undertake, claiming that their substance is allegorical to or directly representative of historical events. The selectivity of these crimes for their sensational nature is overtly evidenced in the titles of the blog posts, which would become actual titles of three of the game's individual cases: 'The Red

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[72] Ibid., 5.
[73] 'New Inventions Sweep the Nation - Part One: Communication, Devices and More'.
[74] 'A New National Order: The Power of Federal Law Emerges in Early 20th Century America'.
[75] As Dika notes, 'The genre had traditionally prided itself on the "reality" of its source material, claiming from its inception that its stories were "ripped from the headlines."' Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 220.

Lipstick Murder',[76] 'A Marriage Made in Heaven',[77] and 'The Nicholson Electroplating Disaster'.[78]

All three posts took pains to emphasise the 'true' and 'real' nature of *LAN's* 'inspiration'. In addition to relaying details of the actual crimes that were fictionalised in-game, some posts included hyperlinks to documentary evidence: for example, 'The Nicholson Electroplating Disaster' included a link to the original 1947 *Time* article that reported on the incident that the case was based on, as well as the Los Angeles Fire Department Historical Society's Flickr photostream.[79] 'A Marriage Made in Heaven' included a hyperlink to the GoogleMaps location of the featured crime.[80] This is used to commodify the fact that players would get to experience 'original' cases designed by Team Bondi and Rockstar first hand who, having drawn on the authenticity of basing the fictions on reality, had imbued them with 'even more elaborate turns and revelations you'll have to play to discover…'.[81] Not only is this 'authentic' historical content therefore, it is authentic historical content *plus* something more: Rockstar branded interactivity.

What each of these blog posts create in totality is an image of Team Bondi and Rockstar's labour, accentuating claims of historical authenticity. This is further-reiterated in the pull-out booklet included with the physical copy of *LAN* for PlayStation3. A 'Special Thanks' section of the credits serves as a checklist for all of the archives or repositories Team Bondi and Rockstar consulted. It includes individual representatives of the 20th Century Fox Research Library, the University of Southern California's Special Collections Library, UCLA's Department of Special Collections and Geography Air Photo Archives, 'USMC Motion Picture and TV Liaison staff Sergent Sergio Jimenez, Captain Joshua Redding, Staff Sergent Chad E. McMeen', the Los Angeles Police and Fire Department Historical Societies, The Huntington Library, Jay Leno's private collection (of cars, presumably), among many others.[82] The citation of these 'legitimate' repositories of historical evidence, without much explanation of their use or methods in

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[76] '"The Red Lipstick Murder": Real Crime Stories of 1947 Los Angeles That Inspired L.A. Noire Cases'.
[77] 'The Real Crimes Behind L.A. Noire Cases: "A Marriage Made in Heaven"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 26 April 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/15501/the-real-crimes-behind-la-noire-cases-a-marriage-made-in-heaven.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
[78] 'The Real Crimes Behind L.A. Noire Cases: "The Nicholson Electroplating Disaster"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 14 June 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/%20%2016801/the-real-crimes-behind-la-noire-cases-the-nicholson-electroplati.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
[79] See 'The Real Crimes Behind L.A. Noire Cases: "The Nicholson Electroplating Disaster"'.
[80] 'The Real Crimes Behind L.A. Noire Cases: "A Marriage Made in Heaven"'.
[81] 'The Real Crimes Behind L.A. Noire Cases: "The Nicholson Electroplating Disaster"'.
[82] *L.A. Noire* instruction manual, in-box, PlayStation3 edition (2011), 18.

studying them, are intended to further ground what *LAN* depicts in hard 'facts', and allow the developers to present as true historians.

But perhaps nowhere is this labour more explicitly commodified than in another series of posts offering a glimpse 'behind the scenes' at *LAN*'s 'Painstaking Production Design,' overviewing the attention to detail paid to the use of props,[83] costumes,[84] sets and locations.[85] These posts sought to legitimate the creation of an immersive, 'deep, dark and extremely faithful recreation of 1940's Los Angeles', via the

> painstaking steps taken in development to assemble and reflect a digital world as accurately as possible. Years of involved motion-capture, groundbreaking MotionScan facial recognition technology, as well as passionate research and production design have been just a few of the efforts employed to help make this one of the most original and epic interactive experiences you've played yet.[86]

These posts featured quotations from Team Bondi's production designer Simon Wood, as an authoritative figure offering 'insights' and indeed, acting as representative of Team Bondi/Rockstar's capacity as developer-historian. On the one hand there are claimed attempts at using historical sources to create a kind of social history: '*I bought from eBay old House & Garden magazines, along with Architectural Digest, Sears catalogues and Interior Decorating guides from the 40's. These were invaluable as not only did it show you the best of how they styled their homes, but it showed you how they lived*'.[87] Yet conversely, the superficial nature of these historical reconstructions becomes apparent: '*It was such a glamorous period for clothes... Sexy women and men in hats*.'[88]

Despite frequent claims of 'faithfulness', 'accuracy' and 'authenticity', the creation of period detail and something seemingly-historical is largely reduced down to material culture and imagery that looks or feels the part. As always, authenticity is something immersive and sensory, and moreover, contingent on the player already knowing what kind of look and feel to expect – whether educated by these posts, or via their familiarity

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[83] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part Three – Props'.
[84] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part Two – Costume & Wardrobe', *Rockstar Newswire*, 1 February 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/13391/behind-the-scenes-of-la-noires-painstaking-production-design-par.html/#comments [accessed 10 March 2016].
[85] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A. Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part One – Locations & Set Design', *Rockstar Newswire*, 31 January 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/13361/behind-the-scenes-of-la-noires-painstaking-production-design-par.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
[86] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A. Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part One – Locations & Set Design'.
[87] Quote from Simon Wood in 'Behind the Scenes of L.A. Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part One – Locations & Set Design'.
[88] Quote from Simon Wood in 'Behind the Scenes of L.A Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part Two – Costume & Wardrobe'.

with these periods through experience of other visual media. It is of little consequence, for example, that some of the in-game locations were created from scratch,[89] as long as they fit the mood of the game, and indeed, appeal to the sense of authenticity generated by the 'painstaking' labour of recreating this period of the past.

Regarding historical films, Jonathan Stubbs has argued that these visual media texts 'tend to be built from the details up – working backwards from the surface, perhaps – and often seek to overwhelm viewers with material evidence evoking the past.'[90] Similarly, Jameson argued that the experience of 'genuine historicity' was impossible, since 'the nostalgia film', in his view, 'was never a matter of some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content, but instead approached the "past" though stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image, and "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion'.[91] More crucially, while Stubbs cautions that 'a surfeit of realistic visual detail does not in itself recreate the past', it rather appears to be the case that 'the ability of certain iconographies to evoke given periods may be a function of their familiarity to contemporary audiences rather than their authenticity.'[92] Stubbs therefore, like Robert Rosenstone before him, encourages us to understand historical films as 'one of the principal ways in which people form relationships with the past.'[93] Ultimately, Rockstar here mimic the long-held practices of the promotion and marketing of historical films in general: the creation and deployment of 'extra-textual engagements' and materials that aim to foreground the kinds of historical research behind their creation, the supposed sincerity of attempts to get things 'right', the consistent reference to 'real' materials, all 'serv[ing] to argue in favour of the authenticity and thus for the overall quality of the [text] in question.'[94] But what also becomes clear is the demonstrable commitment of Rockstar to reinforcing their proclivity for looking back at American history *by way of* the history of American cinema, guiding (or taking advantage of a presumed) 'familiarity' of their audience with the way these periods have already been represented in popular media.

This is apparent in the frequent slippage between Rockstar's evocation of 'real' historical detail and documentary evidence, and the reference to cinematic production

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[89] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A. Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part One – Locations & Set Design'.
[90] Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 58.
[91] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 19.
[92] Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*, 58.
[93] Ibid., 3; See also Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*.
[94] Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*, 28–34.

practices that they adopted in the development of *LAN* especially. Any boundary that may exist between cinema history, the representation of history in cinema, and 'real' history, is almost entirely effaced. These effacements range from the relatively innocuous renaming of the real 'O'Connor' electroplating disaster in a nod to (Jack) Nicholson, and his role as Jay Gittes in *Chinatown*,[95] to the fact that all of the posts pertaining to the game's 'painstaking production design' spend as much time referring to the ways the game's production mimicked that of a film production as they did to the historical detail.

There are two layers to this slippage between history and cinema history. Firstly, Rockstar appear to implicitly claim that the adoption of cinematic production practices makes the game's production more prestigious, and thus the game itself more valuable. Secondly, they imply that much of the 'real' historical detail that was adopted was actually also an object of significance in (usually Hollywood) cinema history. For example, in part one, set design is noted as 'among the earliest steps taken towards creating [*LAN*'s] realistically authentic digital world of 1947 Los Angeles', whereas it is described as 'often the last step for most major motion pictures before principal photography'. Meanwhile, a 'run down apartment building' used as a location on a Traffic Desk case is described as 'an almost perfect replica of the Barclay Hotel in L.A. [*sic*] which has been used as a location in many Hollywood films.'[96] In part two, the hiring of 'professional film and TV Costume Designer, Wendy Cork' to work from the research that Wood and the production team had conducted, prefaces the fact that most of the costumes were supplied by '*the biggest costume house in the business, Western Costume*'. It was noted that this costume house had '*dressed "Gone with the Wind", "The Godfather", "L.A. Confidential", "Chinatown". Pretty much every film you've ever seen. If you spread out their costume warehouse end to end, it would run for 12 miles.*'[97] Similarly, in part three, Wood informs readers that Team Bondi '*hired almost every conceivable vintage prop from the biggest Hollywood prop houses in the business.*'[98] By referencing prestige Hollywood historical films – some of them neo-*noir*, at that – in addition to the mimesis of cinematic production practices more generally, seeks to imbue the very substructures beneath the game with authenticity. It attempts to predetermine the experience available to players as one built upon these 'authentic' historical cinematic foundations.

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[95] As alluded to in 'The Real Crimes Behind L.A. Noire Cases: "The Nicholson Electroplating Disaster"'.
[96] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A. Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part One – Locations & Set Design'.
[97] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part Two – Costume & Wardrobe'.
[98] 'Behind the Scenes of L.A Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part Three – Props'.

Rockstar's exposition here of the development of *LAN*, is accompanied by a promotional discourse that likens this process to a mimicking of the development of previous *cinematic* endeavours, not necessarily solely historical processes. Thus, while there are a number of evocations to 'real' historical research undertaken in the production process, these are largely outweighed by the fact that this research and development very often is into cinematic history and production, and cultural history (history *in* cinema), not necessarily the social and/or political history that the games also represent. Thus while wishing to capitalise on the currency of historicity, the creation of a what Sobchack defined as a 'field of historicality',[99] and the supposed value that can be ascribed to media that are the product of 'painstaking' (historical) labour and meticulous construction, Rockstar understand that the true currency and weight of their products lies in their cinematic qualities: their representation of 'Americana', not 'America'.[100]

More especially, the appeal is that this is *Rockstar*'s selection, curation, and representation of past details. Whether of the 'True West' or 'Real Crime' underpinnings of their titles, the selection of these details to authenticate and legitimate their creation of historical narratives, characters, in-game locations and interactive experiences, are predicated on Rockstar presenting themselves in the role of developer-historian, and it being *their* guidance and 'historical insights' that players read about through these official channels of communication, before or accompanying playing the games for themselves.

Conclusions: The Historiographic Surround and the Rockstar Brand

The materials that make up the games' promotional surround offer access to Rockstar's own historiographic position. Deconstructing the games into individual 'historical' elements which are, it is claimed, accurate or inherently real, suggests that the in-game combination of them creates an experience that is inherently authentic. What these materials actually offer is a simplified, accessible, consumable version of American history, packaged according to Rockstar's brand ethos and to legitimate its core values and thematic engagements. Such an extreme focus on individual aspects apparently 'unearthed' from the past appears as an attempt to disguise the inherent selectivity of who, and what, these games are about and how reductive these historical narratives are.

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[99] Sobchack, 'Surge and Splendor', 36–37.

[100] Dan Houser in Ben McKelvey, 'Meet the Brains behind *Grand Theft Auto'*, *Stuff*, 26 December 2012, http://www.stuff.co.nz/technology/games/8122020/Meet-the-brains-behind-Grand-Theft-Auto [accessed 14 December 2016].

Essentially, here Rockstar create their own archive of historical 'facts', presenting them as events, people, or processes naturally and objectively plucked from America's past. Though this arrangement of historical materials seems intended to evoke Barthes's 'reality effect',[101] as explored in the introduction, there is nothing neutral about the selection and preservation of material that constitutes any form of 'archive', as historical theorists have long maintained. Rockstar, in this company-controlled space, exercise the authority to control what is (and is not) preserved, in order to ensure (or at least suggest) certain meanings or conclusions.[102] These elements are of course chosen insofar as their sum authenticates the way *RDR* and *LAN* represent America's past. Thus, the game's 'realist' simulation style, and its attendant 'reconstructionist' epistemological stance,[103] is reflected in these Rockstar-archived historical paratexts, which similarly claim to offer access an objective 'truth' or 'real'. It is a 'truth' that they have, however, themselves created. Indeed, what these historicising choices themselves consist of – the kind of historical narrative created in the games' promotional, historiographic surround – are significantly, visibly reductive. While in any kind of representation of the past, choice will always be reductive, what *is* chosen may tell us a great deal about the kind of history Rockstar is trying to evoke.

The same discursive reduction of (cultural) history is apparent in the way these games were simultaneously promoted in terms of their cinematic inspirations and influences.

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[101] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, 141.
[102] That is, to re-apply Derrida and Foucault. See Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9; and 'The Historical *a priori* and the Archive', in Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 126–31.
[103] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 61–69.

Chapter 3: Creating a Discourse of Cinematic Authenticity

> *'In the lead up to Red Dead Redemption we'd like to highlight a few of our favorite westerns. If you haven't seen them, these movies will definitely entertain you and get you in the mood for the game.'*
>
> – 'Rockstar Recommends: The Wild Bunch'.[1]

> *For those wrapped up in the allure of 1940s Los Angeles and the hardboiled detectives, conniving criminals and glamorous femme fatales that inhabit it - and for those PC gamers out there getting ready for L.A. Noire's release in just a few weeks - we've got another in our continuing list of favorite and apropos Film Noir entries for you to check out.*
>
> – 'Rockstar Recommends: Scene of the Crime'.[2]

Rockstar's promotional strategies offer the usual 'behind the scenes' exclusives often seen in the marketing cycles for other visual media products (and of course, other video games), an attempt at validating the historical authenticity they claim for and sell as part of a game's experience. As seen above however, the sense of historical authenticity that Rockstar claim is also intrinsically tied to the reproduction of cinematic-industrial labour, and historical films' representations of the past. Accompanying the games' marketing discourses of *historical* authenticity, an adjacent aspect of *RDR* and *LAN*'s promotion involves selling their *cinematic* authenticity and cultural-historical foundations. Another of Rockstar's claims for authenticity positions the games in relation to previous representations of historical periods: consciously addressing pre-existing 'fictional representations'[3] and how the games fit into a specific, wider historical discourse. In this way – as with most historical games – Rockstar seek out a 'combination of authenticity and film', which inextricably interlinks "'factual" history and cinematic trope.'[4]

As Bolter and Grusin defined in *Remediation*, new media forms never exist in isolation, and operate by incorporating and mimicking older media forms both in form and content, as well as 'cultural meaning'.[5] Yet instead of replacing older forms, there

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[1] 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Wild Bunch"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 17 November 2009, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2001/rockstar-recommends-the-wild-bunch.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[2] 'Rockstar Recommends: "Scene Of The Crime"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 12 October 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/19171/rockstar-recommends-scene-of-the-crime.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[3] This is an authentication technique discussed by Ramsay in a different context in Ramsay, 'Flagging up History: The Past as a DVD Bonus Feature', 59–60.

[4] de Groot, 'Empathy and Enfranchisement', 408.

[5] Bolter and Grusin, 55; For discussion of video games and cinema specifically, pp. 96-99; For similar discussions along these lines, see also André Gaudreault and Phillipe Marion, 'A Medium Is Always Born

now exists a 'dialogic relationship between old and new media'.[6] As with the majority of Rockstar's titles (and many mainstream games, at that), a cine-literate player is assumed and catered for: games play up to generic tropes that give meaning to the action and in-game spaces.[7] But beyond allowing players to recognise textual components of the games themselves, these kinds of expectations were paratextually pre-empted by Rockstar. Specific *Newswire* posts offered readers ways of enhancing their access to the games by highlighting their wider cultural antecedents. Attempting to reify their authenticity, notable examples of American genre cinema were featured which connected thematically or otherwise to the games' 'Western' and '*noir*' attributes.

Rockstar take advantage of a new media environment that encourages re-watching and repeat viewing of 'classic' cinema, reaping the benefits of the internet's capacity to foster 'the so-called new cinephila.'[8] In the home, 'armored' by an ever-growing number of audio-visual 'on demand' technologies and capabilities, audiences can control their own patterns of consumption, increasingly confined not to schedules, but dictated by taste and desires.[9] Watching films, it is suggested, will not detract from but rather heighten anticipation for Rockstar's forthcoming titles. This also attempts to control potential players' entrance to these texts, determining the criteria for what is 'authentic'. That is, Rockstar's curation of this historiographic surround suggests they presume a *specific kind* of cultural-literacy of their players, one that they actively seek to shape if players do not already have a specific frame of reference that adheres to Rockstar's brand.

The 'dialogic relationship between old and new media'[10] is laid bare in these promotional strategies. Just as brands partner with other media brands or products to ensure (or claim) 'quality' and the provision of certain services,[11] Rockstar use cinema history as a promotional tool, aligning their content as inspired by and referencing ubiquitous genres. Fragments of cinema history and its representation of America's past – often dispersed across the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries – are highlighted and

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Twice ...', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 3, no. 1 (2005): 3–15; Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 191–236.

[6] Powell, 'Introduction: Promotion in an Era of Convergence', 2.

[7] Soraya Murray, *On Video Games*, 184-184 especially; See also exploration of genre and meaning in King and Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*.

[8] Roy Menarini and Luca Tralli, 'Paratexts from Cinephilia to Mediaphilia (through Ludification Culture)', in *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media: Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts*, ed. Sara Pesce and Paolo Noto (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 138–51; James Quandt, 'Everyone I Know Is Stayin' Home: The New Cinephilia', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 50, no. 1–2 (2009): 206–9,.

[9] Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 9.

[10] Powell, 'Introduction: Promotion in an Era of Convergence', 2.

[11] Martens, 'Connecting with Consumers'.

assembled by Rockstar into a new whole intended to suggest the historicity and quality of their own products. But as will be seen, this binds the company's claims of authenticity to a narrow view of complex and nuanced histories, cinematic or otherwise.

A *discourse of cinematic authenticity*

As noted in chapter two, marketing claims of cinematic and historical authenticity frequently overlap in Rockstar's promotional discourses. For example, the recognisability of the actors and actresses who provided voices and motion capture performances for the 400 or so characters in *LAN* was used as a means of marketing cinematic authenticity. Since the development of *GTA III,* Rockstar sought out actors famous for their roles in film and television, casting them as voice actors in their games.[12] *LAN* went a step further by also incorporating actors' faces and physical performances. A *Newswire* series of blogs entitled 'Where have I seen that face?' highlighted some of the non-game roles they were credited with, establishing their position in visual media history. These posts specifically noted that a significant proportion of the cast had appeared on a period television series which was popular at the time, and often critically appraised as prestige in quality. That is, 'fans of *Mad Men* [AMC, 2007-2015] are sure to recognize many faces beyond Aaron Staton', known at the time for playing Ken Cosgrove on the show, who motion-captured and voiced *LAN*'s protagonist Cole Phelps.[13]

In more than one interview, Brendan McNamara noted that it was Dan Houser's idea to cast Staton as Phelps precisely because he had seen him on *Mad Men.*[14] Staton himself noted in a recent reflection on the game that Team Bondi hired actors based on their having 'an understanding of the period'.[15] Despite the fact that *Mad Men* was set in the Fifties and Sixties, it connoted a broad enough sense of 'past-ness' or 'mid-twentieth-

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[12] Oftentimes these are actors famous for playing gangster, such as Ray Liotta, Frank Vincent, Michael Madsen, and Samuel L. Jackson, or other stars known for their roles in the New Hollywood cinema of the late Sixties and beyond, such as Burt Reynolds, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper.

[13] 'Where've I Seen That Face? L.A. Noire's Character Actor Line-Up: Detective Biggs, Gloria Bishop, Captain Gordon O'Leary and More', *Rockstar Newswire*, 13 June 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/16751/whereve-i-seen-that-face-la- noires-character-actor-lineup-detect.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[14] See for example Keith Stuart, '*L.A. Noire*: The Interactive Detective', *The Guardian*, 5 May 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/may/05/la-noire-video-gaming-noir [accessed 25 April 2016].

[15] Quote from Aaron Staton in Meslow, 'Revisiting *L.A. Noire*, the Game That Nearly Revolutionized the Video Game Industry'.

century-ness' to underpin the sense of authenticity Rockstar sought to promote,[16] while also endeavouring to legitimate the game against the industrial conventions and cultural capital of more established media.[17]

Rockstar's deliberate foregrounding of a 'serious' actor's credentials in *other* visual media as a marker of their performance's authenticity reaches similar heights in the promotion of *RDR*. In the game, the way that NPCs react to stimuli – the 'natural looking' reactions Rockstar wanted both NPCs and Marston to exhibit to, for example, receiving gunshot wounds, or how they might stagger and fall if hit or tripped – is validated by the extent to which they mimic the performances of stunt men in films, not 'real' gunshot victims.[18] This sort of mimicry even extends to the 'physical death behaviours' of horses: programmed 'to mimic stunt horses from Western films' in how they fall and move, fetishising 'a realistic tendon simulation [which] keeps their hind legs in anatomically accurate poses'. To ensure this was the case, the fact that the production team had motion captured an actual horse (including its facial expressions), is discussed at great lengths in one promotional interview.[19] In another, it is noted that the horse they used, 'Bianco', was owned by a 'proper old-time cowboy', and the team was 'assured that Bianco has seen far more studio time than any of the staff on the shoot'. This horse in particular therefore had the privilege of authentic movie experience which supposedly 'showed in the end results'.[20] Thus, there is significant slippage between the intention to authentically recreate or represent the histories of the American West and post-war Los Angeles and the history of these periods' representations in cinema.

More explicitly than this however, Rockstar-authored content instructed potential

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[16] It is perhaps worth noting that *Mad Men*'s (re)mediation of American history has been read by academics for the way that, much like *LAN*, it constructs the past via superficial play of surfaces ('a copy of a copy of a copy'), and broadly connotes a superficial sense of 'pastness', following a Jamesonian logic. See for example Vera Dika, 'Between Nostalgia and Regret: Strategies of Historical Disruption from Douglas Sirk to Mad Men', in *Hollywood and the American Historical Film*, ed. J.E. Smyth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 228–29; Shawn Shimpach, '*Mad Men* Is History', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 37, no. 4 (2017): 722–44.

[17] In a footnote to a wider analysis of *LAN's* relationship to 'semi-documentary' *film noirs,* Jedd Hakimi notes that this can be read as 'a production decision that perhaps aims to tap into a contemporary sense of the American mid-century by borrowing associations from other texts'. Hakimi's seeming hesitation to foreground this conclusion is arguably unwarranted, as it appears this is almost certainly the rationale behind such a production decision. See Jedd Hakimi, 'Playing Los Angeles Itself: Versions of and From the Historical City in *L.A. Noire* and the "Semi-Documentary" Noir', *Wide Screen* 6, no. 1 (2016): 8, footnote 21.

[18] Ted Carson, in his capacity as the game's Technical Director, discusses this in Gamespot Staff, '*Red Dead Redemption*' [accessed 11 March 2016].

[19] Ted Carson in Ibid.

[20] Josh Bass quoted in Gamespot Staff, 'Breaking in the Digital Horses of *Red Dead Redemption'*, *Gamespot*, 10 May 2010, http://www.gamespot.com/articles/breaking-in-the-digital-horses-of-red-dead-redemption/1100-6261863/ [accessed 11 March 2016].

players in ways of enhancing their access to the games, by highlighting their cultural influences. While only in the case of their remake of *The Warriors* (2004) have Rockstar's titles been, in the most literal sense, text-to-text adaptations,[21] adaptation theory offers an additional framework that helps make sense of the choices, and ultimately, historical interpretations undertaken in *RDR* and *LAN*. There has been a movement away from the sort of 'fidelity criticism' that was once the norm in adaptation studies.[22] Scholars such as Dika discuss the ways that new texts have been created or adapted from older forms for which no single original source existed, as in television serials turned into individual films. Rather, the 'raw materials' of certain concepts, images, characters and themes are replicated and expanded upon,[23] echoing Hutcheon's argument that 'adaptors are first interpreters and then creators.'[24]

As in written historiography, depending on the medium or form a particular adaptation takes, and the myriad reasons for adapting in the first place, the adapter will make choices about what (or what not) to include. Hutcheon reads this as the process of 'paraphrasing' source material.[25] Paraphrase is summarised as 'translation [of an original text or source] with latitude, where the author is kept in view […], but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified.'[26] Essentially, an adaptor attempts to replicate or remain faithful to the 'sense' of an original text (and its author). Certain elements are 'salvaged' and incorporated into a new adaptation,[27] while an audience's sense of 'palimpsestuous intertextuality' allows them to see adaptations as the product of a number of different sources of influence: 'texts are said to be mosaics

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[21] Aubrey Anable, 'Playing (in) the City: *The Warriors* and Images of Urban Disorder', in *Game On, Hollywood! Essays on the Intersection of Video Games and Cinema*, ed. Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers (Jefferson: Macfarland & Company, 2013), 86–100.

[22] As Linda Hutcheon writes, the once-existing 'morally loaded discourse of fidelity' was bound up with inherent inferiority judgements of adaptations, yet was also predicated on the fact that text-to-text adaptation was the only goal; and thus, texts should be read in terms of how an adaptation differed or stayed faithful to its 'source'. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 3–7; See also Thomas Leitch, 'Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads', *Adaptation* 1, no. 1 (2008); Evidently this opinion is now widely challenged in favour of approaches that account for the complexity of the process of 'adapting'. See Francesco Casetti, 'Adaptation and Mis-Adaptations'; Thomas Leitch, 'Twice-Told Tales: Disavowal and the Rhetoric of the Remake', in *Dead Ringers*, ed. Jennifer Forrest and Leonard R. Koos (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 37–62.

[23] Dika, *Recycled Culture*, 202–3.

[24] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 18–19.

[25] Hutcheon takes 'Paraphrase' as a concept from George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 62; cited in Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 17.

[26] Citing John Dryden in Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 17.

[27] Hutcheon, 20.

of citations that are visible and invisible, heard and silent; they are always already written and read'.[28]

Indeed, Rockstar repurpose and reference narrative, visual, or character elements drawn from an entire generic formation, 'salvaging' and repositioning these dispersed 'raw materials' in both their games *and* overtly in promotional discourses. Rockstar actively suggest that accessing the media cited in paratexts will help players to get in 'the mood' or 'the spirit' to play the games upon release,[29] and therefore explicitly encouraging players to make intertextual identifications between their games and the pop-culture that predates them. From the outset, Rockstar pay deference to, while acknowledging their interlinked relationship with, a certain kind of generic feeling – a subjectivity that is unmeasurable, and yet can be commodified as authentic for their purposes of legitimation. While Rockstar publicly declare their brand values of making games that feel like 'classic' entries into their respect genre canons,[30] promotional content negotiates what these 'classic' genre staples were or could look like.

Rockstar therefore deliberately try to show their process of interpretation, demonstrating a rationale behind the creative process, as well as the sum of the formula used: *genre history* ÷ *Rockstar's development intentions* = *Rockstar game*. Showing these sources foregrounds the origin points for many themes, characters, and the 'tone' in their titles; those that will 'reappear' within them, carrying the 'memory of an earlier discursive

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[28] Here Hutcheon cites the importance of post-structuralist semioticians like Julia Kristeva, and her notion of 'intertextuality', and structuralist semioticians (like Barthes) to these discussions, which have 'stress[ed] the relation of individual works to other works and to an entire cultural system', and have subsequently 'been important in [challenging] dominant post-romantic notions of originality, uniqueness, and autonomy.' Hutcheon, 21; See also Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', in *The Kristeva Reader*, trans. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 35–59; Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text', in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36–63.

[29] 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Wild Bunch"'. 'Rockstar Recommends: "Chinatown"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 18 February 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/13771/rockstar-recommends-chinatown.html [accessed 10 March 2016]. 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up - Part One', *Rockstar Newswire*, 10 May 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/15851/rockstar-recommends-a-film-noir-round-up-part-one.html [accessed 10 March 2016]. 'Rockstar Recommends: The Best of the Rest of the West', *Rockstar Newswire*, 15 March 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/3791/rockstar-recommends-the-best-of-the-rest-of-the-west.html [accessed 10 March 2016]. 'Rockstar Recommends: "High Plains Drifter"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 23 November 2009, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2241/rockstar-recommends-high-plains-drifter.html [accessed 10 March 2016]. 'A Rockstar Recommends Recap: Our Favorite Westerns – And Yours', *Rockstar Newswire*, 14 May 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/5311/a-rockstar-recommends-recap-our-favorite-westerns-and-yours.html [accessed 10 March 2016]. This is something that Hutcheon notes that 'many professional reviewers and audience members' are wont to do themselves: 'resort to the elusive notion of the "spirit" of a work or an artist that has to be captured and conveyed in the adaptation for it to be a success […] Sometimes it is "tone" that is deemed central, though rarely defined.' Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 10.

[30] Dan Houser in Gaudiosi, 'Rockstar Games' Dan Houser'.

event'.[31] Rockstar claim the representation of a certain 'spirit' or 'mood', encourage those initiated with particular film-historical knowledge (and taste), as well as initiate new possible consumers of their repackaged genre histories, to read what they are presented with as authentic. But it can only ever be authentic to that which Rockstar have engineered in the first place: a 'salvaged' history of American film culture and its development, the creation of a canon of Rockstar's own. This formula does not account for what is missing, or de-historicised. What has been salvaged, of course, is not a complete history of American society and culture, but rather a discretely-condensed version of the history of the 'Western' and '*noir*' genres. Select films are extracted from their individual position within cinema history, and inserted into a new narrative that suits Rockstar's promotional needs, affirming aspects of the games as justified and authentic.

In trying to formulate a 'cultural approach to television genre theory', Mittell — by way of Foucault's 'discursive formations'[32] — argues that genres are inherently '*discursive practices*.'[33] While genres, as they are discussed, might appear 'natural' or normal, 'stable, static, and bounded', individual texts are inherently the 'sites of discursive practice' around which an images of a 'genre' are built.[34] Formed 'from the outside', what constitutes the components of a genre is 'culturally constituted and mutable', depending on the context in which it is discussed.[35] This is symptomatic of the problems of genre theory more widely. According to Rick Altman, there has often been a presumption that genres are uncomplicated things in need of no interrogation. Critics can be comfortable believing that '[w]e all know a genre when we see one', finding it unnecessary to question or reflect on the 'underlying assumptions' of the work of film critics and theorists regarding genres and their conceptions. As a result, very often critics and scholars will tend to '[stick] to a familiar canon' when writing about the past and current state of the film industry and the titles it produces, 'because somehow they seem to represent the genre more fully or faithfully than other apparently more tangential films.'[36] This has led, however, to the canonisation of particular films over others, that has created a largely 'distorted picture of Hollywood's practices and Hollywood's output'.[37] Genres are often

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[31] Casetti, 'Adaptation and Mis-Adaptations', 82.
[32] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.
[33] Emphasis in original text. Jason Mittell, 'A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory', *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (2001): 8.
[34] Ibid., 9.
[35] Ibid., 8–11.
[36] Rick Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 27–28.
[37] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 52.

'cleansed' by critics according to taste or politics.[38] Yet still genre serves an important function in marketing products.[39] Moreover, certain genres – the Western and *noir* in particular – have crossover appeal, appear to cater to certain interlinked 'fantasies', and share themes like American-masculine heroism and crisis. [40] The fact that Rockstar can sell (so effectively) certain dominant images of these genres suggests their function as pre-sold, highly marketable commodities, and that their 'know it when you see it' nature is culturally ingrained. It is here argued that Rockstar create a kind of 'discursive cluster' in order to generate a discourse of cinematic authenticity for their games; neatly packaging a version of complex genres and defining their history in a way that aimed to make *RDR* and *LAN* appear the most authentic.

There is a long history of the deployment of these kinds of authenticating devices within the wider discursive situation of individual films or 'auteur' directors, as for example Nöel Carroll illustrated in the case of 'the boom of allusionism' in New Hollywood cinema.[41] A 'major expressive device' used by directors 'to make comments on the fictional worlds of their films',

> *Allusion*, as I am using it, is an umbrella term covering a mixed lot of practices including quotations, the memorialization of past genres, the reworking of past genres, *homages*, and the recreation of 'classic' scenes, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes, gesture, and so forth from film history, especially as that history was crystalized and codified in the sixties and early seventies.[42]

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[38] Smyth, 'The Western That Got Its Content "From Elsewhere"'.

[39] Indeed, genre is important to game as much as to film: as Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska overviewed, genre 'provides a context that makes the action meaningful, within an established frame of reference, rather than arbitrary – a factor that strongly increases the immersive and pleasurable potential of the experience', a way of justifying the actions players can or must take. King and Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts*, 57–58.

[40] See Cawelti, 'The Gunfighter and the Hard-Boiled Dick'.

[41] Using one person's tastes or recommendations to construct the 'correct' meanings or understandings of a new text is by no means confined to Rockstar's marketing alone however, as a similar tendency continues to form the basis of the promotional hype that exists around certain contemporary film releases. Prominent 'auteur' filmmakers have also employed the same kind of paratextual authentication of their films and vision, which is often supported by major institutions of film criticism themselves. For example, in June and August of 2017 respectively, Edgar Wright and Christopher Nolan curated seasons of films at the BFI in London, ahead of the release of *Baby Driver* (2017) and *Dunkirk* (2017). 'Car Car Land' and 'Christopher Nolan Presents' specifically offered the chance to revisit certain films that were seen as influential on these new releases, feeding the wider 'consumable identity' of these new texts to authenticate their foundations; and, in the case of Dunkirk at least, using cinema as an authenticator of Nolan's take on World War II, as well as cinema history.These BFI seasons were specifically discussed in the two separate Sight&Sound cover features on the directors and their films ahead of release, see Mark Kermode, 'Boy Racer', *Sight & Sound*, July 2017; Christina Newland, 'The Fast and The Furious', *Sight & Sound*, July 2017; Nick James, 'The Great Escape', *Sight & Sound*, August 2017.

[42] Noël Carroll, 'The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (And Beyond)', *October* 20 (1982): 52, emphasis in original text.

When the auteurist 'canon' of New Hollywood filmmakers and their cinematic reference points was being formed in the 1960s and 1970s, allusions to this canon became a way that new filmmakers could signal their own legitimacy, skill, or the value of their films to a film-literate audience, by alluding back to older films in a number of ways, both explicitly or more implicitly.[43] These allusions were not meant to be interpreted as 'plagiarism' on the part of the filmmaker or creator, but on the other hand 'as a means for projecting and reinforcing the themes and the emotive and aesthetic qualities of the new films'– for example, that they have 'a Hawksian world view'.[44] By inferring the meanings or interpretations that a knowing audience is meant to take from their film then, a filmmaker can, through 'the invocation of a Hawksian world view', create or encourage 'a privileged hermeneutic filter for informed viewers, who can use it to bring into sharp focus the filmmaker's attitude or ethos.'[45] Carroll's discussion of 'allusions' and 'worldview' can be read similar to discussions on authorship; for example, Leora Hadas' notion of 'promotional authorship', as expressed through paratexts acting as a set of '3D glasses', 'bring[ing] to the forefront certain elements in the text while pushing back and obscuring others'.[46]

These male 'auteurist' directors were not broadcasting a message in a one-way process purely for their own enjoyment, though indeed, self-indulgent referentiality amongst a knowing film-school-educated cohort was likely an aspect of it. These films were 'greeted by an expanding cinema-learned coterie', where 'at least part of their audience was prepared to look for their allusions to film history and to see in them signals of the expressive commitments of their films.'[47] While not adaptations, they bank on the same sort of 'pleasure' that scholars have identified as that which consumers of adaptations may feel.[48]

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[43] The examples of strategies of allusion that Carroll gives are: 'the outright imitation of film-historical referents; the insertion of classic clips into new films; the mention of illustrious and coyly nonillustrious films and filmmakers in dialogue; the arch play of titles on marquees, television screens, poster, and bookshelves in the background of shots; the retreading of archaic styles; and the mobilization of conventional, transparently remodelled characters, stereotypes, moods, and plots.' See Carroll, 'The Future of Allusion', 52.
[44] Ibid., 53.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Hadas, 'A New Vision'.
[47] Carroll, 'The Future of Allusion', 55.
[48] For example, Hutcheon maintains that 'part of this pleasure [and appeal of adaptations] […] comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change'. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 4–5.

This recognition is fostered by explicit allusions to film history, both paratextually and textually. This is indeed necessary, since to call the Western, or more explicitly, *film noir,* genres in themselves, as noted is inherently problematic. Individual films, while providing the foundation for these genres, are worked into the games' 'consumable identity'[49] insofar as they authenticate the kind of (cultural) history they offer players. The risk of doing so is minimised by creating such a promotional discourse that will coach those who are *not* film literate, or otherwise only accessing these texts as 'Rockstar games', in reading them the right way: as faithful to a particular consumable version of the wider (more diverse) cinematic canon, as it has been here intentionally clustered around these games. These 'discursive clusters' subsequently form the basis of Rockstar's marketing allusions, and they are reconstituted and communicated to players via *Newswire* blog posts under the heading 'Rockstar Recommends'.

Thus, in order to understand the way that Rockstar have constructed historical representations in the role of developer-historian, it is useful to first consider the company's active role as an adapter, not simply of individual texts-to-games, as has been explored by some,[50] but of generic formations which are inherently problematic in themselves. But there is of course more at stake here, because these narratives are overtly and deliberately historical, and claiming to represent a kind of objective truth about America's past. Therefore, the choice elements of American cultural history that have been 'kept in view', and the sort of film-historical knowledge that is foregrounded or expected, are details that reveal certain historiographical attitudes and arguments the company is making about the past, in both their promotional discourses and the games themselves.

'Rockstar Recommends'

Roughly six-months before the release of *RDR*, a 'Rockstar Recommends' series of blog posts was published on Rockstar's *Newswire*. 'Rockstar Recommends' functioned in a similar way to the 'True West' or 'real crimes' posts that sought to foreground the historical authenticity of *RDR* and *LAN*. However, in place of documentary evidence like photographs and archival materials, film trailers were embedded into posts as a point of reference to cinema history.

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[49] Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema'.
[50] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*; Papazian and Sommers, 'Introduction'.

Framed as offering a selection of Rockstar's 'favorite' films, they were alleged 'to help you get primed' to play the games upon release, and to pass time beforehand.[51] As Martin Barker notes, paratextual materials and their content 'have to be of some interest in themselves. They have to be *worth attending to, taking notice of and perhaps acquiring*'. They must be 'double-jointed': having their own value as interesting content in and of themselves, while explicitly pointing to the work they are associated with.[52] The paragraphs of information that accompany the trailers allow for Rockstar to explain why that selection is one of their favourites, why it is important to their game, and/or why that film is important in the history of cinema itself. These blog posts afford Rockstar opportunities to negotiate the meanings of these films for readers who may go on to view and interpret them through Rockstar's lens, designed to induct potential players into the game's Western or post-war world, whether (or not) the audience is already acquainted with these 'classic' staples of these genres.[53]

Moreover, also foregrounded is the fact that these choices are influenced by the cultural experience and tastes of the creators of these games themselves. Referring to them as 'recommendations', 'favorites', or childhood 'guilty pleasures', suggests a certain authorial force behind these selections. The 'we' of Rockstar suggests a certain demographic, or at least shared brand vison is behind these games, speaking to a demographic with certain shared experiences and tastes in cinema and popular culture. This may in turn dictate the boundaries of what can (and cannot) be included in these representations. These selections therefore have significance beyond simply orienting devices. They serve as indicators of Rockstar's own historiographic vision of not only the histories of the West and the post-war era, but also the media that is popularly seen to represent them.

Red Dead Redemption **and the Western**

In the historical promotion of *RDR*, Rockstar were keen to emphasise the 'savagery and treacherousness of the West' in the final years of the Frontier, and that this was emblematic of the 'True West' experience.[54] Complementing this, the game's wider

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[51] 'Rockstar Recommends: "Detour"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 11 January 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com /newswire/article/12811/rockstar-recommends-detour.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
[52] Barker, 'Speaking of "Paratexts": A Theoretical Revisitation', 243.
[53] That these paratexts are intended for both western aficionados and the uninitiated is made explicit in the first blog post. See 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Wild Bunch"'.
[54] 'Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part One: Frank James' [accessed 10 March 2016].

cultural influences also crystallise around these themes. Both the choices of texts, and the explanatory summaries that accompany them, betray the function of these allusions to the Western's cultural history in a number of ways. Most prominently, in trying to capture a 'tone' or 'mood', and offer players an access point through which to 'get in the spirit' of the game before its release, these selections disclose the way the Western genre is 'adapted' to fit Rockstar's purpose.

The media products that are 'recommended', and thereby made into a canon of Rockstar's own, revolve around masculinity and the experiences of (usually white) men, and more often than not work to position the 'traditional' locale of the Western as the *American* West. The selections – explicitly or implicitly – afford male authorship and stardom chief currency when creating stories and narratives about this historically and geographically exclusive period: the American-Mexican borderlands, when the Wild West is 'dying'. Dispersed films that seemingly encapsulate these themes are pulled together to create a singular, consumable version of the Western's history, serving specifically to legitimate what *RDR* is seen to represent and offer players. Within this 'discursive cluster' a darker, more cynical (and indeed, highly exclusive) light is cast on the comparatively more diverse and complex Western genre's history.

The first film featured was Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), described as a 'classic' that 'may well be the greatest western of them all'. Rockstar credit the film not only with changing the presentation of violence in cinema and altering the course of the Western genre, but furthermore, that 'its influence can still be seen in any shooter [game] you are playing today.'[55] Beyond the fact that *RDR*'s narrative is a thinly-veiled homage to Peckinpah's,[56] there are other more important reasons this selection is unsurprising. In a notable parallel to Rockstar's own popular-profile, *The Wild Bunch* is not only often claimed to be 'one of the greatest Westerns ever made,' but has also equally 'been an ongoing subject of debate on a range of other topics, from movie violence to the representation of women on screen.'[57] Replace 'movie violence' and 'on screen' with 'in games' and an identical statement could be made of Rockstar's reputation.

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[55] 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Wild Bunch"'.

[56] It is vividly apparent that *RDR* tries to reflect (if not outright mimic) the film's narrative arc and the themes it explores. Pike Bishop's (William Holden) line, 'We've got to start thinking beyond our guns. Those days are closing fast', is symptomatic of exactly the period of 'the West's' closing that the game takes as setting. John Marston is, like Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan), a former outlaw strong-armed by 'The Law' into tracking down, apprehending or killing his former associates – a theme frequently returned to in these recommendations – so as to advance the cause of 'civilisation', presented as cynically and ironically as possible, and culminating in the death of the (anti)hero.

[57] Andrew Patrick Nelson, *Still in the Saddle: The Hollywood Western, 1969-1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 43.

The Wild Bunch is also a film that 'sits atop the revisionist canon', a term that has come to 'dominate' critical and popular discussions of the Western from the 1960s onwards.[58] Positioning the film at the apogee of Rockstar's canon of 'recommendations' therefore signals allegiance to the dominant popular and critical consensus around 'revisionist' Westerns of the late 1960s and 1970s. Usually seen to have been as kick-started by Peckinpah, these films are often read as a product of American political and social unrest, New Hollywood 'auteurs', and offering a violent ideological challenge to earlier 'Golden Age' Westerns which mythologised westward expansion.[59]

Similarly, film critics and historians have placed weight on Peckinpah's work: that he worked to 'attack' the genre from within, tearing apart its 'core themes and constructs' for the ensuing generation of filmmakers.[60] He has been referred to varyingly as 'He-Who-Must-Be-Admired – the director as great artist who brought respect to the lowly Western by transcending it in the face of philistine studio interference',[61] or 'the high priest of cinematic violence',[62] and his influence on later filmmakers as 'ubiquitous'.[63] *The Wild Bunch* was described by Paul Seydor (Peckinpah's biographer) as 'one of the great artworks of our century',[64] and his films generally were 'recklessly high on beauty and excess', as Pauline Kael remarked.[65] According to Seydor, Peckinpah's outlook on American society and culture allegedly rejects 'fatuous certainties and pious hypocrites rampant in our official culture', creating largely 'compromised' and morally ambiguous heroes who must use violence to find some sort of (ultimately unsatisfying) 'redemption', which reflected a general disdain for humans in general.[66] Pertinently here, all three of the Peckinpah Westerns Rockstar 'recommend'[67] are elsewhere discussed by Steve Neale, while making a wider argument about the spectacle of masculinity in mainstream cinema. That is, Neale suggests that they 'are shot through with nostalgia, with an obsession with images and definitions of masculinity and masculine codes of behaviour, and with images

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[58] Ibid., 42, 6.
[59] Ibid., 6.
[60] Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: BFI, 2004), 202.
[61] Ibid., 11.
[62] Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 150.
[63] Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films, A Reconsideration* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), xxiv.
[64] Ibid., xxiv.
[65] Pauline Kael, 'Peckinpah's Obsession (1972)', in *For Keeps* (New York: Dutton, 1994), 422.
[66] Seydor, *Peckinpah*, xx.
[67] Peckinpah's influence is similarly cited in a later blog that collates 'the best of the rest of the west', with specific mention made of *Major Dundee* (1965) and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973): according to Rockstar, other 'brutal and long-misunderstood' Peckinpah films. See 'Rockstar Recommends: The Best of the Rest of the West'.

of male narcissism and the threats posed to it by women, society and the Law.'[68] Indeed, Rockstar follows a similar pattern of thematic and aesthetic engagement with the Western.

Yet this is a pervasive issue in popular criticism and perceptions of what the Western became and did beyond the 1960s. As Andrew Patrick Nelson argues, not only is the 'emphasis on *The Wild Bunch* in histories of the Western is misleading,'[69] but moreover, the emphasis placed on 'revisionist' Westerns as symptomatic of the 'zeitgeist' of cinemagoing and American social consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s is equally disingenuous. While this notion has an enduring popular and critical currency, *The Wild Bunch* was 'well outside the top 20 earners in 1969', just as other so-called 'revisionist' Westerns made within this period were neither the most populous nor popular with audiences.[70] Much as this film, and those regularly associated with 'revisionism' are seen to represent a 'savage break from Western tradition', there were far more Westerns produced that did not challenge the so-called 'Golden Age' conventions and themes of the Western.[71] Nor did the aesthetic choices made by Peckinpah especially represent some radical new invention of film grammar, narrative, or even a standalone depiction of cinematic violence.[72] While many canonical Westerns released since have also been described as 'revisionist', this suggests that the term has a shifting, flexible meaning, but also adds a weight of value and legitimacy to the film it is used to describe.

The truth is of course far more complex than a mere canon of select Westerns marked by brutality, male violence, and assumed 'revisionism'. A more complete picture of the Western in the period suggests the 'multiplicity' and 'complexity' of the genre.[73] But the very point of Rockstar Recommends is to simplify these complexities in a way that makes *RDR* seem the heir-apparent to the Western genre's progression. To do so they must be selective, and reduce the complex historical and reception context of these films into Klinger's notion of 'capitalizable elements.'[74] Arguably, at this point in time making reference to *The Wild Bunch* is all that is necessary to evoke this well-known

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[68] Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema', *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983), 10.
[69] Nelson, *Still in the Saddle*, 46.
[70] Ibid., 46, 10.
[71] Moreover, certain attempts at 'revising' the genre's myths were present in even earlier films like *High Noon* or *Johnny Guitar*, which themselves also had the benefit of critical subtext and 'auteur' filmmaker currency. Ibid., 20.
[72] The origins of many of the narrative and thematic elements, use of violence, and visual techniques associated with Peckinpah is explored in Ibid., 45-47 especially.
[73] Ibid., 7.
[74] Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema'.

popular and critical definition. It aligns Rockstar's 'vision' with Peckinpah's '(re)vision' of the genre, drawing on the currency of these Westerns' perceived critical and subversive stance.[75] Thus, though the word 'revisionist' is never used, from the beginning Rockstar sought to position *RDR* as the direct descendent of this canonical wave of late-1960s and 1970s Westerns. As far as we can see, this was successful. There is a tendency of games journalists to link *RDR* to *The Wild Bunch* and other late-60s and 70s Westerns, but to do so superficially, avoiding any sort of critical evaluation of the wider implications of this.[76] The broader context of Peckinpah within the Western genre, as well as his wider influences and contributions in other genres, are almost always ignored in favour of the 'look' of the film and its depictions of violence and Western action, even in academic writing on the game.[77]

The way that Rockstar (and indeed, critics) invoke surface level details to generate a certain 'mood' that suits their promotional aims, may be understood as a kind of 'textural poaching.' Adapting Henry Jenkins' original term ('text*ual* poaching') for fans who reuse and remix media content,[78] Jennifer Gillan makes the distinction that text*ural* poaching, on the other hand, involves the 'appropriation of […] the look or feel of a shot or sequence of shots', turning it into short form media (such as gifs), and reposting to online platforms that are inherently 'visually oriented.'[79] Gillan argues that specific frame grabs – taken out of their wider context in a media product and transformed into gifs, which are then posted to evoke certain moods or style inspirations – 'creates [a] false impression' of 'consistence', especially in terms of specific characters and the seeming

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[75] Again, this is also unsurprising given that one of the cornerstones of Rockstar's brand identity is critique or 'satire' of America, as explored in chapter one.

[76] For example, as a preface to his interview with Rob Nelson (*RDR*'s Art Director), Ali Plumb wrote that 'Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch is the most obvious influence, as you guide your character over the border to Mexico, rob a train, help a group of revolutionaries and mow down a horde of banditos with a maxim gun.' This comment no doubt vastly oversimplifies the experience players can have while navigating the Mexican territory of the game world, and the complex narrative that engages and implicates players by association with both sides of the Mexican Revolution. See Ali Plumb, '*Red Dead Redemption* Goes to the Movies', *Empire,* 19 May 2011, http://empireonline.bauercdn.com/empireblogs/infinite-lives/post/p779 [accessed 20 November 2015].

[77] This can also be found in Buel's chapter on 'Western' games, and particularly *RDR*: describing the 'self-conscious effort on the part of the design team to create a gaming experience based heavily on the narrative and visual style of cinematic Westerns— particularly those of Sam Peckinpah', describing only the tendency toward depicting 'stylized violence' and that the 'rugged character representative of the past as being displaced by civilization as represented by more modern weaponry and, eventually, the automobile'. See Buel, 'Playing (with) the Western', 54.

[78] For example, fan fiction for television shows like *Star Trek*. See Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

[79] For example, Pinterest or Buzzfeed. See Jennifer Gillan, 'Textural Poaching *Twin Peaks*: The Audrey Horne Sweater Girl Gifs', *International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 11, no. 2 (2016): 12.

stasis of their performances and personality.[80] Subsequently, particular 'textual delights' can be created that are entirely removed from complex or perhaps 'frustrating textual details', which may have a contradictory logical or ideological status,[81] and thus complicate the image or mood suggested in this discrete, contained, spreadable form.[82]

What Rockstar attempt to generate through 'Rockstar Recommends' is another kind of 'textural poaching.' Presenting themselves as fans of the Western genre, and thus engaging in the practice of sharing their 'favorites' with other fans, Rockstar take specific films out of their place in film or cultural history and highlight elements they have tried to recapture in *RDR*. Trailers are here the short form content used to stand in for entire films, and the accompanying text refers to small elements of an otherwise vast and complicated pop-cultural and generic landscape. Certain elements are privileged over others; certain preferred meanings noted as opposed to those that might suggest otherwise. Any ambiguities that may be present in the text (or in wider criticism of it) are subsumed under the superficial claims toward mood, tone, character, or setting, which combined, seek to familiarise players with the intended meaning or experience the game will offer. The Rockstar vision filters complications into simplicities; ordered around the values of the brand and its expectations for gameplay and narrative.

This kind of textural poaching is present in other 'Recommends' posts. Beginning with *The Wild Bunch* allows Rockstar to continue their own canon-creation in a way that suggests every (in their opinion) notable Western that followed it had a similar objective: to challenge the 'myths' of the West, as allegedly perpetuated by traditional, old-fashioned Westerns, and embed the Western within more 'realistic', brutal parameters. Conveniently, this minimises the fact that many of these Westerns – and indeed, Rockstar's selection of them – create some new myths of their own: particularly, that stories about white-masculine violence are the only stories worth telling, and that contain 'truth'.

Clint Eastwood, another member of the post-1960s cohort of hypermasculinity, also features prominently in Rockstar's canon.[83] Arguably, Eastwood's work with Sergio

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[80] As an example, Gillan uses the online proliferations of the cult TV drama *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). Ibid., 10.

[81] Or in the case of *Twin Peaks*, for example, be inherently surreal or contradictory in meaning.

[82] Gillan, 'Textural Poaching *Twin Peaks*', 11; For notions of 'spreadability' in media content, see Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

[83] As Andrew Patrick Nelson notes, though there is some critical disagreement over whether Eastwood's Westerns are 'revisionist', his works are more often than not included within this popular and critical category. See Nelson, *Still in the Saddle*, 39, 31.

Leone in the *Dollars* trilogy (1964-1966) was key to a shift towards more masculine-oriented Western films beyond the 1960s. Eastwood's view that 'The West was made by violent, uncomplicated men […] and it is that strength and simplicity I want to recapture' could be read as something Rockstar sought to assert through Marston's story.[84] As noted, a recurring theme of Eastwood's films is the 'corruption of the institutions of "civilisation"', while also 'offer[ing] individualistic and narcissistic fantasies in encouraging our allegiance with a skilled, (sometimes) morally superior hero and our opposition to the criminal and the corrupt, ineffective, or helpless community'.[85] A similar precis could be offered for *RDR*.

Yet Eastwood has arguably become known more as an icon of masculinity than simply an icon of the Western.[86] Citing Eastwood's influence, in his capacity as an icon of American masculinity, has the potential for signifying or including his other iconic male characters in the game's wider 'menu of intertexts',[87] which are drawn from other genres like the action film.[88] Jim Kitses argued that while 'no film-maker owes their identity to the Western more than Clint Eastwood', it was Eastwood who returned to the Western at key moments of his career, not that he necessarily made a significant contribution to it in and of himself.[89] While some argue that 'all Eastwood's films either reference or are in fact essentially Westerns,'[90] Kitses counters that to do so can only be

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[84] Quoted in Joe Street, *Dirty Harry's America: Clint Eastwood, Harry Callahan, and the Conservative Backlash* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 17.

[85] Carol Plantinga, 'Spectacles of Death: Clint Eastwood and Violence in "Unforgiven"', *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 2 (1998): 67, 71.

[86] Armando J. Prats, 'Back from the Sunset: The Western, The Eastwood Hero, and Unforgiven', *Journal of Film and Video* 47, no. 1/3 (1995): 111–12; A feminist perspective on Eastwood's negotiation of American masculinity is offered by Drucilla Cornell, *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

[87] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 141.

[88] Indeed, Rockstar elsewhere explicitly acknowledge the influence of Eastwood as actor/director on their other video games, when two Dirty Harry sequels are offered as recommendations for cinematic depictions of 'spectacular' gun violence and quintessentially 80s cinema. References to Eastwood are found in the 'Rockstar Recommends' equivalent posts that accompanied the rerelease of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (mentioning *Sudden Impact* [1983]) and *Max Payne 3* (citing *The Enforcer* [1973]). Both unsurprisingly make reference to his role as "Dirty" Harry Callaghan. See 'A Totally Rad Roundup of 80s Flicks in Honor of Vice City', *Rockstar Newswire*, 9 January 2013, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/48041/a-totally-rad-roundup-of-80s-flicks-in-honor-of-vice-city.html [accessed 10 March 2016]. 'Rockstar Recommends: A Chronology of Favorite Movie Shootouts and Standoffs', *Rockstar Newswire*, 20 February 2012, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/20741/rockstar-recommends-a-chronology-of-favorite-movie-shootouts-and.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[89] Kitses, *Horizons West*, 314, 285.

[90] Shari Roberts, 'Western Meets Eastwood', in Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 45-57; and Gerald Mast and Bruce Kawin, *A Short History of the Movies* (Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster, 1996), both cited in Kitses, 286; Gestures to this are also apparent in Plantinga, 'Spectacles of Death: Clint Eastwood and Violence in "Unforgiven"', 73; David Buchanan, 'Another Fistful: The *American Sniper* Franchise and Clint Eastwood's Post-9/11 American War Film as Neo-Western', in *The Films of Clint Eastwood: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Matt Wanat and Leonard Engel (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), eds., 196-198.

contextualised amidst the pervasively 'narrow view of the genre as essentially a vehicle for the exploration and validation of masculinity.'[91] Moreover, critical discussion of the actor/director that reduces him to an icon of masculinity overlooks many of the ways that other academics have explored the 'complicated and often surprising implications of Eastwood's gender politics', as well as making attempts at negotiating the need for more diverse racial representations in American cinema.[92] None of Rockstar's gesturing to Eastwood appears to draw on anything other than his currency as a masculine icon. This is one of the first apparent suggestions that creating a Western canon of Rockstar's own has less to do with honouring the actual history of its development, and rather more to do with a personal, subjective inclination toward films seen as both exemplary and that justify *RDR*'s representations.

For example, *High Plains Drifter* (1973) is chosen for its 'brutal', 'morally ambiguous', and 'bizarre' qualities, and Eastwood's own portrayal of a 'menacing' outlaw.[93] While thematically signalling to the dominant perception that revisionism equals moral ambiguity and brutality, the post deepens these divisions between the 'old' and 'new' Western by offering a Hollywood-historical anecdote: John Wayne found the film offensive and 'against the spirit of the west'.[94] This subtly marks a departure between the more 'traditional', old-fashioned Westerns that Wayne is seen to epitomise, and the 'socially conscious', 'progressive' revisionist Westerns Rockstar highlight. This is a false division,[95] albeit one that signals more about the appearance of taste than the actual history of the Western genre. This division is cemented by the later 'recommendation' of Eastwood's final directorial Western, and arguably *the* most acclaimed Western of the decade. *Unforgiven* (1992) is named 'possibly [Eastwood's] greatest film', and a 'meditation on the possibility of salvation and the illusions people have about both the West and

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[91] Kitses, *Horizons West*, 3.

[92] Matt Wanat and Leonard Engel, 'Introduction', in *The Films of Clint Eastwood: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Matt Wanat and Leonard Engel (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 11; Cornell, *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity*; Raymond Foery, 'Empowering the Victim: Eastwood as a Director of Women', in Matt Wanat and Leonard Engel, eds., *The Films of Clint Eastwood: Critical Perspectives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 69-82; John Streamas, 'The Real War That Got into the Movies: Eastwood and Spielberg in the Pacific', in Matt Wanat and Leonard Engel, eds., *The Films of Clint Eastwood: Critical Perspectives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 99-112.

[93] 'Rockstar Recommends: "High Plains Drifter"'. Eastwood's mysterious, quasi-supernatural 'Stranger' character destined to bring moral judgement on the corrupt town of Lago resembles the recurring mysterious stranger character that features in three of *RDR*'s optional 'stranger' missions. The man dressed in a suit and top hat appears to provoke Marston, and thus the player, into making a series of moral choices, while like Eastwood's character, claiming that he is 'known' to the character, without explaining who he may be.

[94] Kitses also makes reference to this disagreement, suggesting it is a fairly infamous moment in film-critical history. Kitses, *Horizons West*.

[95] Nelson, *Still in the Saddle*, 6.

themselves'.[96] As in *The Wild Bunch*, and setting a precedent for many later recommendations (as well as *RDR*), the reader's attention is drawn back to the cinematic presentation of aging, 'former' outlaws, their interrelationships with other (principally male) Westerners, in a West that is brutal and violent, no place for peoples' past sins to be forgiven or forgotten.

Yet elements of the traditional, 'mythic' West are not entirely eschewed. The only example of John Wayne's extensive body of Westerns selected as 'favorite' is *The Shootist* (1976), chosen likely because it fits chronologically and thematically with 'revisionism'. As with Eastwood, Wayne is reduced to icon status – 'a movie star […] without parallel', despite his problematic 'personal politics'.[97] In Rockstar's canon, Wayne's history in the Western genre is both unexplored and condensed to this single role, in many ways the summation and (literal) ending of his acting career and life. Here Wayne is 'the last famous gunslinger, preparing to die at the dawn of the twentieth century',[98] encompassing his life's work as a professional Westerner, and here fulfilling largely a pedagogical role (in his reluctant mentorship of Ron Howard's young character). There is little indication of a whole host of western films in which Wayne's westerners sparred with various western *women* (or indeed, any characters who were not white men), or even substantially interacted with them at all: earlier canonical Westerns *Stagecoach* (1939), *The Searchers* (1956), *Rio Bravo* (1959), and *True Grit* (1969), to name only a few.

Tellingly, this post is dedicated to more than just Wayne. It is also used as a position from which to invoke the importance of Don Siegel's work as a director: that he had 'just a few years earlier helped reinvent the image of spaghetti western star Clint Eastwood via *Dirty Harry* [1971] and *Play Misty For Me* [1971] [*sic*]'.[99] Siegel – one of Eastwood's founding fathers – shared with him an attitude toward masculinity that found its outlet for expression in individualistic, opposed-to-'conformist'-society violence.[100] And indeed, while John Ford arguably made Wayne's film persona in the 1940s and 1950s, in *The Shootist* Siegel deconstructs Wayne's onscreen image, along with, it is often

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[96] 'Rockstar Recommends: "Unforgiven"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 7 January 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2711/rockstar-recommends-unforgiven.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
[97] 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Shootist"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 30 January 2010, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2911/rockstar-recommends-the-shootist.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
[98] Ibid.
[99] The post actually makes an error, however, in citing Siegel as the director of the latter, which was rather directed by Eastwood. 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Shootist"'.
[100] Kitses, *Horizons West*, 286.

claimed, so many of the 'myths' of the Old West that a later generation sought to 'challenge'.[101]

These 'recommendations' alone therefore provide the foundation for a general trend in Rockstar's canonisation of the Western genre, by selecting only comparatively recent films, or those otherwise thematically connected around brutality: including only those in a new cycle of 'aggressively dystopian', rather than 'utopian' Westerns, seemingly kick-started by Peckinpah and *The Wild Bunch*.[102] The work of a later generation of 'revisionist' filmmakers are continually privileged, as opposed to those who largely founded the cinematic 'West' like John Ford – and indeed, those who routinely included portrayals (whether these were nuanced portrayals or not) of characters who were not hardened, brutal, cynical, white male outlaws. That is, the work of filmmakers of this period like Eastwood in particular, and this latter period of Wayne's work, is seen to typify an outlook in Western cinema that is 'reactively right wing', as J. Hoberman described.[103]

More immediately however, it is films like *Unforgiven* that have the contemporary cultural currency of being, as described in one quarter-century retrospective on the film, the 'gritty' title which 'laid the classic movie western to rest' and resolutely 'dispelled many of the myths which [Eastwood himself] helped to popularise.'[104] Even more alarmingly, it is Eastwood, guided by Leone, following on from Peckinpah, that 'sought to counteract the romantic misrepresentations of violence, history and heroism perpetuated by the genre's talented mythmakers in an effort to bring audiences an undiluted dose of the "real" Wild West.'[105] Almost a decade after *RDR*, this critical take on *Unforgiven* and its place vis-à-vis the Western canon, supports and speaks exactly to the discursive usage of this period in films that Rockstar cite as the most influential. While older criticism of *Unforgiven* assessed that '[d]espite its attempts at revisionism […] effects a mood of affectionate nostalgia for the myth of the West,'[106] other recent retrospectives on the film expands the influence and meaning of its revisionism further by arguing that it unveils the truth that 'America', like William Munny (Eastwood), 'was built on violence', and it

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[101] That is, as one review puts it, John Ford is blamed for creating 'falsehoods', having 'admitted' that he 'print[ed] the legend' in his Westerns like *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance*. David Pountain, 'How *Unforgiven* Laid the Classic Movie Western to Rest', *Little White Lies*, 9 August 2017, http://lwlies.com/articles/unforgiven-clint-eastwood-revisionist-western/; *Unforgiven* is also read in concert with *Liberty Valance* in Kitses, *Horizons West*, 307, 311.
[102] Keller describes *The Wild Bunch* in particular as such. See Alexandra Keller, 'Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns since the Reagan Administration', *Film & History* 33, no. 1 (2003): 52.
[103] J. Hoberman, '"How the West Was Lost"', in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 82.
[104] Pountain, 'How Unforgiven Laid the Classic Movie Western to Rest'.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Plantinga, 'Spectacles of Death: Clint Eastwood and Violence in "Unforgiven"', 77.

was violence of men that were not burdened by 'loving a woman', or having to 'pretend that the love of our family is enough to sustain us'—men will be men.[107]

Rockstar have here tried to redefine what the 'classic' Western actually is, and popular film criticism more generally, by perpetuating the notion that the films that established the Western genre preserved 'myths'. By default, the new 'revisionist' cycle is claimed to be more representative of the 'reality' of American history – 'raw' and 'bloody' as it is claimed that history was.[108] With *RDR* then, Rockstar was alluding to cultural ideas that have (re)crystallised what 'the West' was, replacing one set of 'myths' for another, violent and male-oriented.

The other 'recommendations' offered continue to largely privilege post-1960s Westerns, and the narrative arc of the dying, doomed, former male outlaw and the way he interacts with other male Westerners. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) is described in the post as having 'invented the buddy film', while also being an 'incredible homage to a dying breed of outlaws.'[109] The extended sequences in the film where Butch and Sundance travel together on horseback conversing, are evidently a key reference point for these same moments in-game, where players must ride from location to location. These are major narrativising and world-building moments in *RDR*: spaces for reflection on the world in general at that historical point, and Marston's relationship to and position within it. Indeed, strategy guides for the game actually advise that players should pay attention to these moments, in which John Marston and whichever other NPC he is travelling with have conversations.[110]

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948) is anomalous, being the oldest example in Rockstar's Western canon, but is also called 'perhaps not really a western at all'. Yet is chosen because, like *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, it supports the choice of allowing players to explore Mexico in *RDR*. Most significantly however, it thematically connects once again to the wider theme of the (South)West as a place filled with 'treacherous characters' and 'cynicism', and in Rockstar's view, one of the first

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[107] Brad Gullickson, 'Admitting Our Evil American Soul in Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven', *Film School Rejects*, 9 August 2017, https://filmschoolrejects.com/admitting-evil-american-soul-clint-eastwoods-unforgiven/?utm_content=bufferf1a7b&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer [accessed 16 July 2018].

[108] Pountain, 'How *Unforgiven* Laid the Classic Movie Western to Rest'.

[109] 'Rockstar Recommends: "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 3 December 2009, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2251/rockstar-recommends-butch-cassidy-and-the-sundance-kid.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[110] For example, the game's official strategy guide suggests that, during one phase of the mission "Old Friends, New Problems", players 'listen to the conversation' that John Marston will have with his wife Abigail, while the player drives her home; in which they 'try to determine if this is indeed a viable new start' for them. See BradyGames, *Red Dead Redemption (Signature Series Guide)* (BradyGames, 2010).

Westerns to 'challenge the myth of the west' as a place in which good and civilisation (ambiguously and broadly defined) always won out over evil and savagery.[111]

The Proposition (2005), set in Australia, might seem another off-beat choice, but possess Western narrative themes of 'savagery' versus 'civilisation', as evidenced by Captain Stanley's (Ray Winstone) declaration: 'I will civilise this land.'[112] But the story is largely concerned with Charlie Burns' (Guy Pearce)[113] quest to kill one brutal, outlaw brother (Danny Huston), in order to save the life of another (Richard Wilson), a plot point *RDR* loosely echoes. Moreover, the fact that it is set in Australia is used to delimit what should be considered 'the traditional "West".'[114] While *The Proposition* is described as one of Rockstar's 'favorite westerns' of the noughties decade, and has seemingly all of the 'correct' touchstones (in terms of content) that makes it a fit into Rockstar's canon, having this setting places it firmly into the category of alternate or 'outsider' rather than typical Western.[115] However, it could also be argued that one of the main reasons that this film is mentioned, and praised as so influential, is due to its director John Hillcoat being 'good friend' of Rockstar, as a later 'Recommends' post mentions.[116] Hillcoat helped turn footage from *RDR* into a short machinima film entitled *The Man From Blackwater*, which was aired on the History Channel in late 2010[117] – evidencing Rockstar's intentions that the game's cutscenes alone, let alone wider gameplay elements, all added up to a particularly cinematic narrative; and indeed, furthering their attempts at generating a sense of cinematic authenticity around the game.

Drawing the recommendations to a close is a blog post that offered a 'roundup' of a number of cinematic honourable mentions that are similarly seen as 'favorites' or otherwise influential. Notably included is Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), which is relevant beyond Rockstar's description of the film as 'a darker tale of land rights and betrayal.'[118] Revealingly, it is here explicitly positioned as 'darker'

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111 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 18 December 2009, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2611/rockstar-recommends-the-treasure-of-the-sierra-madre.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

112 'Rockstar Recommends Recap'.

113 It's also worth noting that Pearce's appearance in the film clearly was a significant influence on Rockstar's construction of John Marston's 'look'.

114 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Proposition"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 9 December 2009, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/2411/rockstar-recommends-the-proposition.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

115 Added to this non-'traditional' category are films that are arguably even further removed from the archetypical 'western' setting than The Proposition: Straw Dogs (dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1971) and Fort Apache, The Bronx (dir. Daniel Petrie, 1981). 'The Proposition'.

116 'Rockstar Recommends Recap'.

117 The short film has its own IMDb page: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1663668/.

118 'The Best of the Rest of the West'.

compared to Leone's *Dollar*'s trilogy: significant because of those films' overt associations as *Spaghetti*, arguably not *American* westerns. Indeed, Jim Kitses tellingly described *Once Upon a Time* as 'hardly a Spaghetti Western at all.'[119] Once again, while the *Dollars* trilogy is cited as 'classic' in the post,[120] the currency of Western 'reality' and authenticity is predicated on borrowing from films that are largely 'traditional' (read, American), but also those that are 'darker'.

In this post, the historical outlaw figures of Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid are revisited by citing *Young Guns* (1988). While the accompanying description for the film denigrates it for including 'brat pack' actors like Emilio Estevez, and being in many ways a bit 'ridiculous', what is more interesting is its description as 'a guilty pleasure for us [Rockstar] growing up'.[121] *Young Guns* is an anomalous break from the comparatively abject brutality and cynicism of the aforementioned Westerns. It seems to be have been chosen explicitly because it is a piece of Eighties culture that satisfies 'Rockstar's' childhood nostalgia. This is, then, another clear suggestion that this canon is exclusively created to satisfy Rockstar's own vision of 'the West': inspired by personal experience, taste, and resulting intention to create a Western, not an objective attempt at interpreting and retelling historical reality. This is seemingly confirmed in other posts by the recurring admission that these choices are dictated by Rockstar's personal opinions and taste.[122]

The final 'recommendations' featured are not cinematic, yet also approach a kind of gritty 'revisionism': television miniseries *Lonesome Dove* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. The former, adapted from the 1985 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Larry McMurtry, has been read by academics as helping to '[rejuvenate] the Western for American audiences' in the late-1980s, 'setting the stage for a new cycle of the genre by the early 1990s.'[123] Yet McMurtry himself has been seen to have attempted to deconstruct some of the genre's myths. Thus, while the miniseries was widely received as 'just another Western story featuring traditional cowboy heroism', McMurtry had intended it as 'a critical reworking of the genre's codes and conventions.'[124] This is particularly interesting

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[119] Kitses, *Horizons West*, 276.
[120] 'The Best of the Rest of the West'.
[121] Ibid., emphasis mine.
[122] This is made explicit in the comments justifying the inclusion of *Lonesome Dove* and the trailer for the 2007 remake version of *3:10 to Yuma* in 'The Best of the Rest of the West'; and 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Proposition"'.
[123] Susan Kollin, 'Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western', *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 3 (2001): 559.
[124] Ibid., 559; citing Mark Busby, *Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1995), 237.

when by Rockstar's admission, while they 'considered including the book' in their recommendations, 'we [Rockstar] prefer the TV version.'[125]

Relatedly *Blood Meridian*, written by McCarthy as McMurtry's contemporary, is the only literary example to be featured in and of itself, but is made to appear significant because of its association with the depiction of 'brutal outlaws', and the 'darkest, most brutal side of the American [W]est.'[126] Indeed, academics themselves have linked *RDR*'s 'West' to McCarthy's vision.[127] Elsewhere dubbed an 'anti-Western', McCarthy has been credited with 'add[ing] a grimmer, bleaker vision to the genre, providing what appeared to be the definitive statement on Manifest Destiny.'[128] Thus while complementarily being described by Rockstar as a 'terrifying look at how America was *really built*',[129] it is likely included because of its dealings in explicit violence. *Blood Meridian* is demarcated by Mark Seltzer as one of a wave of contemporary 'splatterpunk' Westerns – adding into this category, notably, *Unforgiven* and *Dead Man* (1995) – which cumulatively appear to 'make the case that the Western was really about serial killing all along.'[130] Along similar lines, Kitses referred to McCarthy as the author who 'gives creative voice to today's revisionist historical studies wherein the frontier is seen as embodying conquest, savagery and exploitation.'[131] That is, McCarthy's 'Westerns are really Southwesterns, laced with a dark fatalism and grotesque incidents. McCarthy is less about redemption and transcendence, more about failure and survival.'[132]

In summation, these texts are indicative of the process by which Rockstar reduce the breadth of Western culture to just a few examples that support their development decisions, or represent those films that are 'personal favorites' and uphold the values of the Rockstar brand. But this kind of genre-canon creation is not unique to Rockstar: as previously discussed, it is exactly the sort of film-critical practice that was undertaken by a new generation of filmmakers looking to allude back to the 'correct' or most auteur-worthy examples of cinematic history, in making films anew.[133] Nor is this the first example of a kind of 'genre cleansing' that has taken place within film criticism. As explored by J.E. Smyth, some films may be deemed 'bad' examples of their respective

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125 'The Best of the Rest of the West'.
126 Ibid.
127 As in, for example, Welsh, *Mixed Realism*, 159–71.
128 Kollin, 'Genre and the Geographies of Violence', 558.
129 'Rest of the West', my emphasis.
130 Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 1.
131 Kitses, *Horizons West*, 6–7.
132 Ibid., 6–7.
133 Carroll, 'The Future of Allusion'.

genres if they pose difficulty to those critics and historians intent on 'impos[ing] order on Hollywood filmmaking', especially with respect to historical films with particular contexts.[134] Smyth elsewhere notes that this is an issue particularly prevalent in the historiography of the Western. Particularly, film criticism of the Hollywood western 'has a code', which 'does not match the content or form of Western film production coming out of Hollywood during much of the studio era.'[135] As Smyth describes, Western films from the mid 1920s onwards which portrayed *other* historical instances, or focussed on female or minority characters, and inevitably 'told other narratives which conflicted with the great story of white masculine conquest', were largely 'neglected by ensuing film criticism as aberrations within a perfect form'. They were erased by favouring films which appeared to fit the Western canon: those that 'focused on masculine professionalism and friendships with other white men [...] became the preferred genre currency'.[136] Though the period has changed, here as well the genre is 'cleansed' in favour of those films that fit in with Rockstar's intentions for *RDR,* and indeed, those recommendations that best conform to the Rockstar brand.

The recurring themes of these selections are all consistent with those that reappear frequently in Rockstar's other titles, as well as those that appear to be deemed suitable as part of the Rockstar brand. Rockstar's brand identity therefore intersects with paratextual content seeking to provide the appropriate 'menu of intertexts'.[137] The final 'Rockstar Recommends' post for *RDR* 'recapped' the films that had been there assembled – framed as Rockstar's 'favorites'. This post also included a poll that allowed fans to vote for their favourites out of Rockstar's selections, or otherwise 'feel free to leave us a note of your personal faves that we didn't include'.[138] By taking time to say that this list was 'incomplete'[139] and 'completely non-exhaustive',[140] while simultaneously seeking to 'poll' fans' favourite Westerns, Rockstar at once create a contained consumable image of the Western genre that is approved by them, while at the same time leaving room for fans and potential players to interact with this brand identity; inserting their own tastes or

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[134] See J. E. Smyth, 'Introduction', in *Hollywood and the American Historical Film*, ed. J.E. Smyth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xix.
[135] Smyth, 'The Western That Got Its Content "From Elsewhere"', 42.
[136] Ibid., 45. Smyth identifies a kind of 'genre cleansing' specifically by considering the case of Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952). While a sequence of the film seems to have been directly incorporated into *RDR*, its influence goes unacknowledged in these paratexts. The scene in question is where Will Kane (Gary Cooper) must free horses from a burning barn that is under attack. The player must do exactly the same thing via John Marston in the mission 'The Burning'.
[137] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 141.
[138] 'Rockstar Recommends Recap'.
[139] 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Wild Bunch"'.
[140] 'Rockstar Recommends Recap'.

create their own expectations.[141] This space, however, is carefully delimited. That is, the poll was accompanied by a comment that warned fans: 'note that anyone suggesting "Wild, Wild West" will have their comment removed for abusive behavior'.[142] Offering this company-to-fan space of interaction never disturbs or disrupts Rockstar's control of their own 'recommendations', and what is (and is not) acceptable within the limits of this 'discursive cluster'.[143]

Moreover, reviewers for their part also did work (consciously or not) to enforce the limits of the Rockstar brand. For example, in a representatively-enthralled review for *gamesradar*, Nathan Irvine judged the authenticity of the experience that the game offered as a 'kick-ass take on the Wild West era', done so 'with a finesse that satisfies every need of anyone who has ever fantasised about being a cowboy.'[144] Yet as a caveat Irvine offered '[u]nless of course, your visions are based solely on *Brokeback Mountain*, in which case you may be disappointed.'[145] There is, then, a 'right' kind of Western film to want to re-enact, and a correct view of the history of 'the West' that it is claimed Rockstar have here replicated.

Though a paratext not authored by Rockstar, this critical delimitation of what kind of 'visions' of the West players might bring to *RDR* is noteworthy. Reading critics' review in light of Jonathan Gray's conception of their potential meaning-making function, reviewers 'hold the powers to set the parameters of viewing [or here, viewing *and* playing], suggesting how we might view the show [/game] (if at all), what to watch for, and how to make sense of it.'[146] Unpacking and offering the key to certain correct (and incorrect) meanings, they can act as gatekeepers to meaning and to the received 'authenticity' of a game. In this sense, it appears that while *RDR* could be intentionally constructed as a kind of (or an homage to) revisionist westerns intended to represent a more 'realistic' rather than 'mythic' vision of life in the West, there is a right and wrong kind of 'revisionist' Western by these standards. *Brokeback Mountain* – the short story (1997) and the film adaptation (2005) – have been read as revisionist, subverting heteronormative,

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[141] This kind of technique has been explored for the promotion of Television programmed too. See Enrica Picarelli, 'On the Problematic Productivity of Hype: *Flashforward*'s Promotional Campaign', in *Besides the Screen: Moving Images through Distribution, Promotion and Curation*, ed. Virginia Crisp and Gabriel Menotti Gonring (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 124–43.
[142] 'Rockstar Recommends Recap'.
[143] Mittell, 'A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory'.
[144] Nathan Irvine, '*Red Dead Redemption* Review', *Gamesradar*, 18 May 2010, http://www.gamesradar.com/red-dead-redemption-review/ [accessed 11 March 2016].
[145] Ibid.
[146] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 167.

masculine-oriented conceptions of the Western in general.[147] Yet while many of Rockstar's own 'recommendations' – and indeed, the strongly-adhered to thematic explorations of their games – involve the interrelationships between Western men, the boundaries of this are kept tightly within the confines of heteronormativity,[148] despite the potential for reading queerness into these narratives espoused by some academics.[149] This is even performed, so it seems, by those outside Rockstar with the position to affect player reception or meaning-creation.

Reviewers could also authenticate Rockstar's attempt at creating a Western more generally, by inducting them into the history of Western cinema from an 'expert' point of view. For one of *The Guardian*'s many features on *RDR*, the game was reviewed and overwhelmingly praised for its sense of authenticity by Phillip French, who expressed his 'admiration' for what Rockstar had achieved:

> They have re-created an *authentic* western town like the one used for endless movies at Old Tucson in Arizona's Saguaro national park and reproduced that amazing railroad station – a great raft of sleepers and a water tower – from the pre-credit sequence of *Once Upon a Time in the West*. They've studied the exterior and interior lighting of influential cinematographers like Winton C. Hoch, Tonino Delli Colli and Bruce Surtees, and produced a lovely pastiche of an Ennio Morricone score. The dialogues are convincing and, in the case of an elegiac exchange on the dying of the old west between the hero and a feisty cowgirl, touchingly eloquent. I haven't felt as excited, so utterly enveloped, since the first time I drove into Monument Valley after decades spent watching movies set there.[150]

Even French, it seems, had a tendency to blur his real and filmic experiences of 'authentic' Western locations like Monument Valley.

The use of French – a long-standing celebrated film critic embedded in decades of critical discourse on cinema, and particularly on Westerns – offers a further marker or

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[147] As noted by David Agruss, in the film 'homosociality is transformed into homosexuality despite their investments in standard tropes of western literature – wide-open landscapes that both transform and discipline individuals, the promise of self-discovery, the threats of the law and of vigilantism […] a fierce dedication to a certain kind of rugged masculinity.' David Agruss, 'Queer Frontiers: Gender and Sexuality in the American West', in *A History of Western American Literature*, ed. Susan Kollin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 363.

[148] Notably, the Oscar-winning screenplay for *Brokeback Mountain* was written by Larry McMurtry, who also wrote *Lonesome Dove*; a story of heterosexual male interrelationships that is made canonical by Rockstar.

[149] Indeed, *Blood Meridian* is used as one example of this in Agruss, 'Queer Frontiers: Gender and Sexuality in the American West', 367.

[150] My emphasis. Phillip French, Peter Serafinowicz, and Tom Chatfield, 'Will *Red Dead Redemption* Bring out the Cowboy in Us All?', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/may/23/red-dead-redemption-game-panel [accessed 11 March 2016].

layer of cultural authentication. French authenticates *RDR* by the standards of the Westerns that he himself participated in canonising; despite the fact that, by his own admission in the article, his experience with video games in general was almost non-existent. It is unclear whether the choice to include French in this review (alongside 'gaming expert' Tom Chatfield and 'comedian and gamer' Peter Serafinowicz) was pushed by Rockstar themselves, or the newspaper's own idea of crediting *RDR* with the potential to 'change gaming forever',[151] affording the medium a cultural maturity it had long been starved of. Either way, it works much to Rockstar's benefit in terms of their own marketing proclivities, not to mention in terms of potentially making their games seem palatable or outright alluring to an audience outside of just 'gamers'– perhaps to those who would follow the criticism of French and other film academics.

What is it, then, that is being justified in these filmic selections? While the presentation of hyperviolence and seemingly-archetypical Western 'action' is certainly a strand that runs through the heart of this attempt at making a canon, it is arguably not the most significant. Typified in selections like, for example, *Unforgiven*, *Butch Cassidy, The Proposition*, and to an extent, *The Shootist*, while many of these films revolve around masculinity expressed through violence, and the presentation of a world that is inherently brutal, very little of their runtime is actually taken up by the performance of this violence. Rather, there are only very short bursts of violence (though it is at times in the extreme, not least in *The Proposition*), rather than extended periods that are all *about* the cinematic presentation of hyperviolence, as in *The Wild Bunch*. This then should indicate that there is something more than just the presentation of violence that is being legitimised by the use of these cinematic authentications in these paratexts. When deciding to buy and play a Western-themed game, evidently little explanation is required as to the kind of 'action' that players can enact: even if the most basic assumptions most people have about the Western, or America's West, is stories about 'cowboys and Indians'.

Yet *RDR* is in no way a game about just 'cowboys and Indians'. Given the breadth of not only the historical period in which many Westerns are set, the number of possible characters – male or female; 'good', 'bad', or somewhere in between – and the context and content of the story, Rockstar have chosen to position *RDR* in comparatively narrow field of vision, with only a very specific story to follow, from the perspective of a very particular kind of outlaw, and with only a limited (though extensive) range of Marston-oriented gameplay options. This does therefore perhaps require some explanation and

[151] Ibid.

justification– and indeed, allusions to the source from where this Western 'reality' is drawn. Thus, certain themes are constantly revisited: (Male) outlaws confronted with their pasts, and/or forced to deal with other men, compelled to exercise violence, either for their own survival or at the behest of a corrupt institutional force. These films are as much about (white) men reflecting on these themes and events, usually at the end of their lives (professional or otherwise), as they are about men being *in action*.

L.A. Noire and the (Neo) *Noir* History of Los Angeles

That Rockstar's promotion of *LAN* attempts to create a 'discursive cluster' out of the *noir* genre is more inherently problematic than their attempt to do so out of Westerns– which were at the very least consciously produced as '*Westerns*'. James Naremore discusses *film noir* in terms of the inherent 'reductive' and 'discursive' nature of its usage; having been used variously and vaguely to describe a cinematic style, ideology, movement, and/or period, depending on a critic's intentions or preference.[152] Indeed, most of these features or qualifications were originally canonised in film criticism by Paul Schrader and his contemporaries in the 1970s.[153] Thus, there never has been any cohesive *film noir* genre to speak of. As Marc Vernet explains,

> As an object or corpus of films, *film noir* does not belong to the history of cinema; it belongs as a notion to the history of film criticism, or, if one prefers, to the history of those who wanted to love American cinema […] and to form an image of it. *Film noir* is a collector's idea that, for the moment, can only be found in books.[154]

The idea of *film noir* as a genre (or style, wave, cycle, or movement) has been described as a 'post-constructed category',[155] kept alive by subsequent waves of film critics and criticism; an inherently, ever-shifting 'discursive cluster'. Yet seemingly it is one cohesive enough to be referenced and drawn-on. Making textual allusion through cinematography, lighting, mise-en-scène, or urban location for example 'is, in virtually dictionarylike fashion, now a telegraphic transmission for anxiety and a "descent" into "existential

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[152] James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, 6.
[153] Paul Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 265–78.
[154] Marc Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 26.
[155] Frank Krutnik, *In A Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 17.

angst," even if that mood is not exactly borne out in the film's own specific dramatic development.'[156]

This sense of '*noir*' cohesion, and the perceived implicit or naturalness of its popular associations, certainly go unchallenged in Rockstar's 'recommendations'. Rather than highlighting the discursive nature of the term's usage, *film noir* within Rockstar's promotion of *LAN* is unsurprisingly made to seem the most innocent of terms. It is claimed that *film noir* refers to a 'classic' and seemingly normative selection of films that came out of that 'storied era of cinema',[157] from Hollywood in the 'genre's original heyday in the 40's and 50's.'[158] Rockstar explicitly reduce *noir* to what they deem its essentials from the outset: the 'dark and gritty days of Los Angeles in 1947', the province of 'femme fatales, hardboiled detectives, gritty desperation, tortured inner monologues, and fatal betrayals around every corner', wrapped up inside an aesthetic of 'unmistakably stark and contrasty [*sic*] lighting characteristic of noir'.[159] *Noir*'s 'classic' cinematic and literary origins are also simplified: the Humphrey Bogart versions of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), and *The Big Sleep* (1946), as well as *Double Indemnity* (1944), in addition to 'every other [Raymond] Chandler, [Dashiell] Hammett, and [James M.] Cain adaptation old and new.'[160]

It is hardly surprising that the perceived, male-authored, 'hardboiled' literary foundations of the genre are credited with such importance. By adapting the English detective tradition, and borrowing elements from both the Western and gothic genres, the work of Chandler and his counterparts is that which is seen to have 'so invaded our Los Angeles imaginings that their idiosyncratic hallucinations have become our regional assumptions', as Paul Skenazy summarises.[161] From the outset these authors cemented Los Angeles as 'not the place of new beginnings but of disastrous finishes'. '[D]issolution and collapse' became core themes of Los Angeles fiction, the end-point of contradictions between the Frontier's promise of 'second chances' and newness, and 'recurring violence' that was perceived as so often a part of Frontier life.[162] Furthermore, as Helen Hanson points out, '*Noir* genre criticism has tended to emphasise its connection with "hard boiled" detective and crime fictions, by writers such as [Hammett, Cain, and Chandler],

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156 Carroll, 'The Future of Allusion'.
157 'Rockstar Recommends: "Detour"'.
158 'Rockstar Recommends: "Chinatown"'.
159 'Rockstar Recommends: "Detour"'.
160 Ibid.
161 Paul Skenazy, 'Behind the Territory Ahead', in *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Essays*, ed. David Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 103-125, 104
162 David Fine, 'Beginning in the Thirties: The Los Angeles Fiction of James M. Cain and Horace McCoy', in *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Essays*, ed. David Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 44.

a connection that foregrounds male narrative centrality, and perceptions of male agency, particularly where the narrative is structured around a criminal investigation.'[163] Citing these authors directs readers (and players) toward a view of *noir* that has long been perpetuated in canonical genre criticism. All of these foundational themes and issues as component parts of the 'genre' that would become considered *film noir* are crucial to setting the right 'tone' and 'mood' for the game's experience, featuring heavily in Rockstar's canonisation of *noir* popular culture, past and more recent.

Again, a pedagogical tone is adopted by recommending Rockstar's 'personal favorites', a way of 'helping *you* [the potential player, as opposed to the 'we' of Rockstar] get primed for the experience'.[164] As with *RDR,* certain themes are foregrounded at the expense of others; defining what is 'authentically' or 'classically' *noir,* in Rockstar's authorial delimitation of it. The themes that consistently reappear in these promotional blogs are fatalism and the plight of the tragic white male protagonist, or else procedural masculinity, and films which revolve around the white male detective's investigation of *noir*ish crimes. These two themes work together to legitimate and authenticate *LAN's* overarching narrative, as it largely revolves around Cole Phelps, and a gameplay structure that fetishises the (police or private) detective's procedure.

The inherent darkness of the urban, and the fatal man caught in a web of deception and darkness are highlighted in the first two selections: *Detour* (1945) and *Scarlet Street* (1945). Both are used to sell the presumed-typical *noir* convention of the 'gut-wrenching' downfall of the 'good-hearted' male protagonist's story.[165] These same thematic strands reoccur throughout these posts' promotional arc: whether in generic 'cornerstones' like *Double Indemnity,* and its 'sexed up' 1980s remake *Body Heat* (1981),[166] or expanding the fatal male trope outward to encapsulate protagonists that fit within Rockstar's wider preoccupation with the 'archetypical bad guy gone good', as in *Crime Wave* (1953).[167]

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163 Hanson cites Frank Krutnik's focus on the 'crime-related quest' as the means by which 'the hero consolidates his masculine identity' as an example of this. Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, 19; Krutnik, *In A Lonely Street*, 86.

164 'Rockstar Recommends: "Detour"'.

165 'Rockstar Recommends: "Detour"'; 'Rockstar Recommends: "Scarlet Street"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 28 January 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/13201/rockstar-recommends-scarlet-street.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

166 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up - Part One'.

167 'Rockstar Recommends: "Crime Wave" Aka "The City Is Dark"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 2 May 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/15621/rockstar-recommends-crime-wave-aka-the-city-is-dark.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

Interconnected with this, the performance of procedural masculinity is also prominent, attributed to both 'classic' and 'neo' *noir* films throughout the blog series– beginning with the citation of *Chinatown* (1974) and *He Walked by Night* (1948). The latter, as one of a number of so-called 'semi-documentary' police procedural *noirs* of post-war Hollywood, indeed allows for the viewing of every aspect of police procedure that *LAN* fetishises and allows players to interact with: 'From examining crime scenes, to interviewing and interrogating leads, to staking out a suspect, to intense cat and mouse pursuits.'[168] The post draws attention to celebrity detective Jack Webb's role in the film, alluding to his wider work on 'legendary detective show' *Dragnet* (original series run 1951-59).[169] These allusions are likely intended to enhance the authenticity of the police procedure that these texts demonstrate: their sensational basis 'on a true story', and attempts at achieving 'realism', despite the fact that they are in and of themselves heavily constructed visions of procedural process.[170]

Chinatown, on the other hand, is credited as a so-called 'obvious' choice, but nevertheless 'a key film for those looking to get in the spirit of things'. *Chinatown*'s designation as a neo-*noir* is problematised, by designating it as 'easily the greatest film noir made after the genre's original heyday'.[171] Once again, Rockstar appears to be seeking to destroy the unnatural break between the Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s deemed *noir* by critical invention, and the later films that have tried to intentionally *be 'noir'*. Revolving around the investigation of J. J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson) — and using the actor as currency here — the film offers the male private detective narrative, as opposed to those working under the institutional confines of the LAPD. Both sides of the same investigatory procedural logic are offered in *LAN,* where players principally control Phelps within the police force, and later Jack Kelso as an insurance investigator turned special investigator.

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168 'Rockstar Recommends: "He Walked By Night"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 28 February 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/14061/rockstar-recommends-he-walked-by-night.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

169 *Dragnet* was indeed 'one of the longest-running and most critical acclaimed dramatic series of 1950s American television', and Webb's radio police drama of the same name similarly 'dominated the airwaves in the previous decade'. In that sense, R. Barton Palmer notes that the programme 'left an indelible mark on American popular culture, inspiring a host of popular imitations in its own time […] and establishing conventions for police action programming that have been followed by the most successful series of the last three decades'. See R. Barton Palmer, '"The Story You Are About To See is True": *Dragnet,* Film Noir and Postwar Realism', in *Television and Criticism,* ed by Solange Davin (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2008), 61.

170 Palmer observes that even critics at the time noted that the 'realism' of *Dragnet*, and how Webb himself endeavoured to construct it, borrowed and subverted cinematic conventions, and Webb was especially influenced by the *noir* films that he had himself acted in. See Ibid., 61-62.

171 'Rockstar Recommends: "Chinatown"'.

Various other forms of the male investigatory or police procedural narrative are offered up in these recommendations, dispersed across canonical genre staples as *The Big Sleep*,[172] and reworkings of *noir* conventions in *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *Blue Velvet* (1986).[173] A deliberate connection is made between *L.A. Confidential* – another neo-*noir* re-categorised as *film noir* – and *Chinatown*, describing them as 'two of the best modern productions of period noir'. They are deemed authentic, then, not only in their use of convention but also of authentic, 'classic heyday' setting. Moreover, *L.A. Confidential*'s value increases in that it is based on one of 'modern crime fiction master' James Ellroy's LA Quartet novels, which is similarly recommended as an 'original' source of *noir*ness.[174] Thus two of the most felt influences on the game are films that are, while made in the Seventies and Nineties respectively, more deliberately *noir* than the 'classic' post-war films cited. That is, the kind of *noir* portrait of 1947 Los Angeles that *LAN* offers is drawn largely from cultural products that intentionally ascribed the period *as noir*, not those offering a 'real' portrait of the history of the city 'as it was' in the late-40s, but rather as it was viewed and mediated by ensuing generations of critics, filmmakers, and authors. By giving more or less equal weight to the way *noir* has been invented and recycled in neo-*noirs* – whether they are set in the 'classic' period, present day, or imagined dystopic futures – Rockstar here are referencing the representation *as* representation, the *un*real as authentic and valuable in and of itself, as a way of getting at the truth of the experience of the city of Los Angeles in that period.

That the experience of procedural masculinity Rockstar are offering here is taken from the *filmic* construction of police or detectives' investigations, not some real version of police procedure, is epitomised by the commentary paragraph accompanying *True Confessions* (1981). One of the possible pleasures of watching the film is framed as the chance 'to delight in a bit more 1947 style police work: where it's all no gloves, no warrants, and shoot-first to get that perp.'[175] Thus despite being made in the early 1980s, it is positioned as offering authentic access to a period nearly four-decades previously. This reliance on film as offering authentic access to the period is also starkly demonstrated by the fact that one of the additional, downloadable content packs for *LAN* directly

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172 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up - Part One'.
173 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up Part Two - The Neo Noirs', *Rockstar Newswire*, 23 May 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/16281/rockstar-recommends-a-film-noir-round-up-part-two-the-neo-noirs.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
174 Ibid.
175 'Rockstar Recommends: "True Confessions"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 5 August 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/18381/rockstar-recommends-true-confessions.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

adapted a 'classic' *noir* film into a case that players could either investigate as part of the main narrative's Vice desk, or as a standalone example of the period's *noir*ness. *The Naked City* (1948) is included in Rockstar's recommendations, and designated as 'such a taut example of captivating, well-paced detective storytelling that we couldn't resist basing an entire homicide desk case around it to recreate it as an interactive experience.'[176] Despite the fact the location of the crime and investigation is changed from New York to Los Angeles, the post is adamant that 'the set-up and other details remain faithful' to the original film. In this comparatively rare moment of direct adaptation '*as adaptation*',[177] then, the value of Rockstar's titles as representations of previous representations of 'the real' is made clear.

As in the recommendations for *RDR*, these posts actively continue the dominant perspective that *film noir* is a product of Hollywood, despite its international influences. As has elsewhere been extensively argued, *film noir* was never a purely American phenomenon in the first place, though it is often popularly 'delimited' as such.[178] Despite the inherently pedagogical tone of Rockstar's framing of these 'recommendations', little reference is paid to the fact that, in the first place, the title of *film noir* was a French invention, attributed often to the criticism of Nino Frank, Eugene Border, and Etienne Chaumeton in the 1940s and 1950s. Nor are any of the French *film noir*s here included as authentic representations (*Rififi*, 1955) or origin points (*Le quai des brumes*, 1938). Moreover, despite the (indeed unavoidable) inclusion of the work of a wide range of European émigré directors like Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Jules Dassin, and Carol Reed (as in *The Third Man,* [1949]) – those whose work is seen to have been so influential in creating the look and feel of the form[179] – the '*film noir* canon' is described in no uncertain terms as 'truly an *American* hallmark', something that Rockstar are 'very proud to be contributing to in a new way' with *LAN*.[180] Reducing a multi-faceted and global history of the development of a 'genre' to its purely American incarnations collapses the weight of a

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[176] 'Rockstar Recommends: "The Naked City"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 16 March 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/14491/rockstar-recommends-the-naked-city.html [accessed 10 March 2016].
[177] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*.
[178] See for example Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland, *Film Noir: Hard-Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).
[179] Vincent Brook, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2009).
[180] Notably, little is mentioned here about the fact that many of the key creative personnel behind the game are British and Australian themselves, suggesting at best a collapsing of individual creative identities into a globalised sense of American-ness, that can be achieved merely by making a cultural text that is seen to have been 'of America' in the first place. See 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up - Part One'.

broad historical discourse into a usefully American definition and origin as part of *LAN*'s 'consumable identity'.[181]

Rockstar forcibly-insert their forthcoming releases into a pre-existing discourse of cinematic appreciation, embedding these products within existing cinephile or culture-appreciative communities. This is made explicit in wider *Newswire* posts associated with *LAN*. Certain blogs posted before and around the game's release drew attention to 'real world' events or festivals that celebrated classic examples of *film noir*. A San Francisco-based *film noir* festival, and a two-week retrospective of Fritz Lang at the Film Forum in New York are both promoted as possible events for those fans whose appetite for *film noir* had been 'whetted' by *LAN*; while the latter demonstrates Rockstar's wider proclivity for privileging male authorship inherently associated with '*noir*' in their canon curation. This is similarly apparent more widely in their recommendations, when recognising the work of directors who appear committed to reworking the 'quintessential trappings of the genre'. For example, Joel and Ethan Coen are celebrated for *Blood Simple* (1984), *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), *Barton Fink* (1991) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998); John Dahl for *Red Rock West* (1993), *The Last Seduction* (1994), and *Kill Me Again* (1989); while David Lynch is credited as 'one of the few real auteurs with longevity in Hollywood'.[182] Again, there is the perceptible use of male 'auteur' currency as an attempt to add weight to the sense of authenticity they seek to generate.

'Rockstar Recommends' made a reappearance on the Rockstar *Newswir*e six years later than its original run. While this seems to suggest that this is a marketing strategy to which Rockstar became attached, as a way of performing their own cine-literacy, a singular post 'recommended' *Lady in the Lake* (1947). It did so to legitimate the fact that *LAN* was being rereleased in 2017 as a VR experience, and to suggest how this experience was in and of itself similar to that of previous filmic depictions of *noir*. *Lady in the Lake* is described as an interesting example of 1940s *noir*. Not only did the post draw readers' attention to the original run of 'Rockstar Recommends' posts via hyperlink, but moreover the script that Robert Montgomery (here playing quintessential *noir* detective Phillip Marlowe) reads, during the opening voiceover to the film – framing the experience it was offering – was used verbatim to promote *LAN*'s new VR experience. Here the original film and its non-diegetic framing are used to evoke a sense of cinematic authenticity, while extending Rockstar's original marketing rhetoric for *LAN,* which claimed it would

[181] Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema'.
[182] See 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up Part Two - The Neo Noirs'.

offer a personalised 'cerebral' video game experience, that was inherently 'something different':

> [I]n honor of this month's release of L.A. Noire: The VR Case Files – our very first foray into virtual reality – there is one classic bit of film noir that feels particularly appropriate to highlight with 'a startling and daring new method of storytelling.' Released in 1947, the very same year that our game is set, *Lady in the Lake* was novel for its time in presenting the entire story from the first-person POV of its protagonist, Raymond Chandler's iconic hardboiled private detective character Philip Marlowe (portrayed by the film's director Robert Montgomery). After a brief introductory narration, you're right in Marlowe's shoes working to crack the case of a missing woman in Los Angeles – reading the faces of desperate clients (is Adrienne Fromsett earnestly looking for help or up to no good?), interrogating people of interest (that southern playboy is quite a charmer – until he isn't), and locating clues (what's that telegram over there on the desk?). Ingenious and engrossing, Lady in the Lake was a hit at the time and it holds up to this day as a fun progenitor of the 1940's crime solving VR experience of The VR Case Files. As Marlowe says during the film's introduction: "YOU'LL see it just as I saw it. YOU'LL meet the people, YOU'LL find the clues… and maybe you'll solve it quick, and maybe you won't. You think you will, eh? Okay, you're smart… but let me give you a tip: you've got to watch them. You've got to watch them all the time. Because things happen when you least expect them."[183]

This final 'Rockstar Recommends' post appears to aptly sum up what Rockstar have endeavoured to do throughout their promotional strategies for *RDR* and *LAN*. Directly seeking to connect to and extend the experience of cinema into their video games, building upon filmic representations and offering interactive access to them, via the personalised, direct-to-fan communication from a company that seeks to retain authorial control of their meaning and intended experience of 'their' game.

***Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, and the 1980s according to Rockstar**

In 2013, *GTA: Vice City* (*GTAVC)* was rereleased for mobile devices, porting across the original 2002 release principally to Apple's mobile platform iOS. Around the same time, and following in the same vein as the 'Rockstar Recommends' blogs that had been

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[183] 'Rockstar Recommends: "Lady In The Lake"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 28 December 2017, https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/60329/Rockstar-Recommends-Lady-in-the-Lake [accessed 28 December 2017].

published since late-2009, a single post appeared on the *Newswire* under the heading 'A Totally Rad Roundup of 80s Flicks in Honor of Vice City'.[184] As in their curation of a genre-defining 'discursive cluster' for *RDR* and *LAN*, the selections in this post sought to offer a taster of quintessentially 1980s cinema, as it was claimed to have inspired the development of *GTAVC* in the first place. These selections were intentionally deployed to support the image or 'vibe' of the Eighties that *GTAVC* itself encapsulated: a socio-cultural context of 'coked-out debutantes, suave and in-control hit men, hot-blooded drug kingpins, egomaniacal movie directors', everything seen to be typical of 'the larger than life attitudes of that "me" decade as served up in the films'.[185]

In this continuation of a previous, internally-generated, carefully curated promotional discourse of cinematic authentication, the films were clearly selected and showcased by Rockstar to authenticate the fact that a portrait of an inherently dark and seedy Miami in the 1980s was what *GTAVC* offered players: the intentional harmonisation of a specific historic time and place with pop-culturally defined notions of it. It moreover reveals the extent of the influence of New Hollywood filmmakers and films on their conception and subsequent representation of American social and cultural history.

The first selection in the list was *Scarface* (1983).[186] This film's own reception context is noted, in addition to its contemporary place within cinephilia, and its importance to the *GTA* franchise more widely than just this title:

> But of course. Largely dismissed at the time as an overblown, needlessly and gratuitously violent and profane remake of Howard Hawks' 1932 gangster classic - it has now, of course, transcended all of that and become one of the biggest and most enduring cult hits of all time - defining what a modern crime epic should be. An absolute top favorite of *ours*, we started paying homage to the film's legacy in GTAIII with Flashback 95.6's [one of the games radio stations] Scarface soundtrack heavy playlist and the casting of Robert Loggia as the sciatica-plagued Ray Machowski - but it goes without saying that Vice City owes much of its inspiration to the vivid characters, style, scenery and music of De Palma and Pacino's 1980s Miami gangster *masterpiece*.[187]

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[184] 'A Totally Rad Roundup of 80s Flicks in Honor of Vice City', *Rockstar Newswire*, January 9, 2013, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/48041/a-totally-rad-roundup-of-80s-flicks-in-honor-of-vice-city.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[185] Ibid.

[186] The influence of the *Scarface* remake on *Vice City* and wider popular culture is (backhandedly) acknowledged by De Palma himself in the recent documentary on his work, *De Palma* (2015). He describes that aspects of his film and style 'gets into the Music culture, hip hop culture, game culture', and that suddenly he became 'a hot director', while clips from *GTAVC* are shown on screen.

[187] My emphasis. 'A Totally Rad Roundup of 80s Flicks in Honor of Vice City'.

This narration of *Scarface*'s significance casts Rockstar not only in the role of film(developer)historian, but moreover as auteuristic craftsmen paying due-deference to their cinematic ancestors. Little mention is made of the fact that De Palma was not involved in writing the screenplay or moving the setting of the film to Miami,[188] having originally left an earlier version of the project before returning only to direct. This would perhaps conflict with the presentation of De Palma's auteur status, and interrupt the conferred legitimacy of citing the director as a key influence on their. *Scarface* is followed later by De Palma's 'very underrated' *Body Double* (1985), with brief mention extended also to *The Untouchables* (1987), one of his other supposed 'flashes of brilliance'.[189] Other honourable mentions included a number of supposedly canonical Eighties titles. *Less Than Zero* (1987) is described as '[h]ands down the darkest movie of the "brat pack" genre' – that indeed, the 1980s is known for having spawned – as well as tying the film to both its literary origins with Bret Easton Ellis (who is noted as having written *American Psycho* [1991]), and that the film is 'a morality tale of excess.' *Manhunter* (1986) is chosen to signify their opinion that Michael Mann 'is almost singlehandedly responsible for defining what 1980s action "looked" like' because of his work on both *Manhunter* and *Miami Vice* (1984-1990), another influential (though not specifically otherwise mentioned here) cultural touchstone for *GTAVC*.[190] *First Blood* (1982) is chosen to signify the fact that Sylvester Stallone's performance in this comparatively 'more taut and psychological thriller […] undoubtedly inspired the decade's later work' of action stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Chuck Norris. *Top Gun* (1986) is described as 'THE blockbuster action epic of summer '86'. A pair of 'special […] mid-80's Stallone "classics"' – *Rocky IV* (1985) and *Over the Top* (1987) – are the noted inspirations for another action movie: this time, a Rockstar-invented fictional one entitled *Push Up: The Movie*, for which adverts appear in *GTAVC*'s world.[191]

The selection of *Sudden Impact* (1983) again deliberately draws attention to the importance of Clint Eastwood's acting and directorial work to Rockstar's oeuvre. Harry Callahan is hardly a surprising reference point for Rockstar to draw on. On the one hand, Eastwood's later acting output has been read as variations on the "Dirty Harry"

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188 This task along and the principal research was completed by Oliver Stone and Sydney Lumet, who was originally meant to direct the feature, developed the idea to set the story in contemporary Miami, rather than retain its period setting.
189 'A Totally Rad Roundup of 80s Flicks in Honor of Vice City'.
190 As explored in, for example, Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum, 'Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice City', in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson and London: Macfarlane and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 162–276.
191 'A Totally Rad Roundup of 80s Flicks in Honor of Vice City'.

archetype,[192] while the pop cultural resonance of the character has been pervasive, both as intertextual reference point in vigilante or police films and cop shows, video games, graphic novels, pulp novels, and even kept alive through online fan fiction.[193] Little explanation is given for Dirty Harry's politics and consistent, active rejection of liberal bureaucracy, nor is the character historically contextualised by way of his interrelationship to a period of conservative backlash against the liberalism of the 1960s and the counterculture.[194] More specifically to *Sudden Impact* – the highest-grossing of the all the Dirty Harry films[195] – there is a similar lack of reference to how fundamental gender politics are to the film; particularly having a female serial killer antagonist who takes vigilante justice into her own hands following a gang rape. Similarly, Rockstar's selection of *Aliens* in the same blog post only references the acting work of Bill Paxton, not to the fact the film is largely known for having a strong female lead in Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver). For what reason then is *Sudden Impact* selected out of all the *Dirty Harry* sequels, which have otherwise been explored for their complicated and often ambiguous explorations of race and gender?[196] It created a meme, as the post is keen to highlight: 'In the years that followed, countless movies and sitcoms were able to mine parody gold out of' Callahan's 'Go ahead, make my day'.[197] This paratext for *GTAVC*, like those for *RDR* and *LAN*, shows a similar proclivity for indulging in a kind of 'textural poaching' to create a certain 'mood', or capitalise on a certain kind of pop-cultural literacy.

Overall this is, unquestionably, a narrow view of Eighties' cinema, privileging hyperviolence, hypermasculine action, criminality, darkness, and ambiguous morality. This is not the 80s of other 'Brat Pack' films (*Sixteen Candles* (1984); *The Breakfast Club* [1985]; *Pretty in Pink* [1986]), nor of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), of *Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *The Goonies* (1985), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), and *Back to the Future* (1985). All are films with as much contemporary resonance and influence as the canon that Rockstar here curates, inspiring a keen sense of nostalgia to particular audiences.

Selling 1980s Miami, turn of the century West, and 1940s Los Angeles, requires deploying a particular kind of cultural knowledge: to create a consumable identity for

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192 Street, *Dirty Harry's America*, 148.
193 As overviewed in Ibid., 177–203.
194 Both Eastwood and Harry Callahan's relationship to this period of backlash is explored thoroughly in Ibid.
195 Ibid., 109.
196 Ibid., especially 110-122.
197 'A Totally Rad Roundup of 80s Flicks in Honor of Vice City'.

these historical periods that can be paratextually accessed and referenced in relation to the claimed authenticity of Rockstar's own interpretations and reconstructions. Taking history from a specific vision of *cultural* history creates a cycle of mutually-beneficial legitimation, a self-fulfilling prophecy of inspiration, influences, and historio-cultural representation.

But there were different levels of appeal courted here; while both inherently nostalgic in value, built upon separate-yet-interlocking cultural foundations:

> Looking back on Grand Theft Auto: Vice City on the occasion of its recent mobile release is a pretty powerful *double-hit of nostalgia* for us. Not only are we here at Rockstar taken back to that wild year of 2002 when we labored to take the groundbreaking 3D GTA experience pioneered in the previous fall's Grand Theft Auto III into a direction that no one at the time expected - but it's also a time to revisit the fascination with 1980s pop culture that inspired Vice City in the first place.[198]

All of the levels of what Rockstar appear to be trying to promote in both *Newswire* posts and their wider brand identity converge in this citation: the currency of auteurs and well-known male actors who have been accorded some kind of film-historical prestige; the personalisation of recommendations, as something 'Rockstar' love or consider a favourite; the importance of specifically defined film-literacy infused with suggested or pre-existing nostalgia for certain features of the cinematic past; and indeed, Rockstar's 'labour' and 'pioneering' work to make the open world genre what it is today.

Conclusions

Ryan Lizardi has argued that in spite of the concerns of 'philosophers of history and critical theorists', 'the norm' that contemporary mass media offers consumers is 'a narcissistic and idealized version of nostalgia'.[199] This individualised 'playlist' version of the past 'defin[ed] [...] through media texts' is perceptible in much contemporary pop-culture, and is 'at odds with centuries of discourse about the importance of maintaining a relationship to a shared cultural past that is critical'.[200] The same can (indeed has) been said for the way the audiences, armed with the capabilities of the internet and other new media platforms, may now access history via visual media, able to 'circumvent the

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198 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
199 Lizardi, *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media*, 2, 4.
200 Ibid, 39, 34.

historical profession' entirely, and access what parts of the past they wish to, when and how they choose to do so.[201] Lizardi particularly evokes distinctly Baudrillardian, Jamesonian concerns, and indeed, does so with particular reference to Rockstar's titles.[202] While not incorrect in the assessment that most of Rockstar's titles draw on the same formal components and gameplay logics – that, for example, *RDR* appears more of a sequel to *GTA* than a prequel, leading to the oversimplification of history from a 'presentist' perspective – these analyses do not go far enough.[203] It does not take into account the way that Rockstar actively use promotional materials to construct and support their historical representations. Rockstar's branding and marketing has always been explicitly 'at odds' with philosophical discourse on nostalgia, and this is 'made explicitly manifest well beyond the textual components of their games […] in addition to borrowing ludological components from previous titles'.[204] This is, moreover, key to the sense of authenticity they seek to generate. This is history through the selections Rockstar have provided players, and these selections themselves are designed to authenticate their own nostalgic image of America's past. Though they invite player and fan interaction and participation with these attempts at canon creation, it is only within the delimitations of *their* 'recommendations' and the limits of their own tastes and brand identity.

By conducting sustained analysis of paratextual sites of information on historical video games like Rockstar's, we can better understand the selection of historical material and how it is chosen for incorporation into video game histories – why it has been selected and how it serves a developer's sale of the past. Rather than trying to tease out various, numerous moments of film-literate 'allusion'[205] that are intertextually referenced in the games, by paying close attention to what is made explicit and directly communicated by Rockstar here as a means of hyping their games, we can begin to theorise with more certainty their attempts at historical interpretation and representation.[206]

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[201] Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.
[202] Lizardi, *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media*, 107–12.
[203] Indeed, the very fact that *RDR* borrows so much from the *GTA* is due perhaps in no small part to the fact that the latter franchise is where Rockstar appear to have honed their technique and established a brand identity. That is, 'presentism' is indeed a valid criticism of Rockstar's dealings with historical representation, but it occurs as much because of the company's strict adherence to branding and brand identity as it does to merely being 'a new [*GTA*] game costumed in an historical skin'. Lizardi, 108.
[204] Wright, 'Marketing Authenticity'.
[205] Carroll, 'The Future of Allusion'.
[206] That is, one player or scholar might see the blatant references to a river named Rio Bravo, or an area of the map named Pike's Basin in *RDR*; or drive past movie theatres playing 'classic' *noirs* in *LAN*. While they are vital to the construction of the game world and making it feel 'authentic' or 'faithful', it is entirely

Just as in the selection of certain historical 'facts' and traces of the past, seemingly uncovered, returned to, and represented by Rockstar both textually and paratextually, these choices are neither objective nor neutral. Klinger posits that the specific elements of a film which are fetishized or rendered 'capitalizable' are inserted into a new narrative within the film's promotion, attributing them with other significations.[207] Exploiting these films' 'textual afterlife' in home viewing via DVD, YouTube or streaming services,[208] Rockstar craft versions of the history of the Western and *noir* by picking and choosing the elements of wider dialectical genre formations that best authenticate game content and development choices. What is offered in both of these games is the chance to interact with the world, and through characters, as it has already been mediated. But, as has been seen, before doing so, the lines of what that 'world' constitutes must be drawn, as though a cohesive sense of what is '*noir*' and 'Western', can be promoted and commodified. Both the 'real' historical details and suitable elements of film history are carefully selected and fit to purpose: the purpose being to further Rockstar's own 'truth' about post-war American society, and the turn of the century American West. In summary, the promotional discourses that constitute these games' historiographic surround, as explored in both this and the previous chapter, support dispersed historical fragments and texts in an attempt to add weight to Rockstar's claims of historicity, while ignoring the conflicting arguments and attitudes individual texts might make, let alone their specific place in the social- or cultural-historical record. The result is a perceptibly dislocated, transhistorical extra-textual narrative of historical brutality and masculinity that supports the stories they deliberately choose to tell.

Rob Horning argues that 'authenticity', as it is marketed and commercialised by brands through their products, acts as a simplifying force.[209] Authenticity 'takes the complex cross-currents of my relations, desires, and behaviour at any given moment and simplifies and orients them,' and 'inauthenticity' can be thereby 'jettisoned'.[210] While Horning is referring to a sense of the authentic *self* that brands suggest can be attained by consuming their products, the ramifications of this assessment can be extended to the promotion of historical games. These marketing discourses take historical and cultural

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subjective as to whether or not a player will recognise or register these moments and what they mean or represent.

[207] Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema', 14.

[208] Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 8.

[209] Rob Horning, 'Mass Authentic', in *Authenticity? Observations and Artistic Strategies in the Post-Digital Age*, ed. Barbara Cueto and Bas Hendrikx (Amsterdam: Valz, 2017), 30–31.

[210] Ibid., 30.

complexities and simplify them into a discrete whole that can be offered as authentic, and ultimately 'real' or 'true'. In line with media scholars' recent observations on the role of branding, Rockstar's brand indeed actively works to 'police' and limit the 'interpretative agency' of fans who pay attention to their performative paratexts, rather than 'expanding the terrain on which meanings can be made'.[211]

Moreover, authenticity is 'often conflated with a static sort of truth' that 'comes to the fore when what could be true seems especially vulnerable, debatable, difficult […] up for auction or appropriation.'[212] This simplified, Rockstar-approved version of American social and cultural history can be used to negotiate the emerging complexities of the 'post'-cultural realms, a world – and more especially, a games industry – that is seeing the increasingly-visible prevalence of women and people of colour in the cultural industries, as well as the rising visibility of queer or *othered* perspectives and representations in popular culture, all of whom now push-back against hegemonic visions of the industry as for (white) men. These issues have a greater immediacy when we come to consider, textually, who players are allowed to be, what rules they must abide by, and what kind of history is represented in these video games, and moreover, who is included within it, and how they are positioned – especially when marketing rhetoric claims that these representations are 'complete' or representative of 'reality'.

[211] Aronczyk, 'Portal or Police?', 112.
[212] Horning, 'Mass Authentic', 29.

Chapter 4: The predetermined limits of historical gameplay

> *'The one thing we really focused on, above all, was to make sure that we provided, in gameplay, as many classic Western situations as we could think of […] We really wanted the game to offer the complete Western experience interactively and stylistically to show both the idealism and brutal cynicism of the Wild West.'*
>
> – Ted Carson, Technical Director, *Red Dead Redemption*.[1]

> *'we didn't set out to make another, you know, crime* GTA *style game based in Los Angeles. […] we believe we're pretty much creating a new genre of video games. […] We don't necessarily have to have a high body count anymore for a game to be fun. You can have something that's far more cerebral and engaging and compelling, because you're watching human performances on screen.'*
>
> – Jeronimo Barrera, VP of Product Development.[2]

What players can do with(in) video games reveals much about a developer's intentions and inclinations, and indeed, what is considered commercially viable. As Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford articulate, while a premium is often place on the agency and nature of 'choice' the medium (claims it) offers players, all video games have 'limitations' that they 'impose on interactivity and player agency.' As a result, '[p]layers do not freely manipulate video games at their will; they are limited by the game's own restrictions and arc of possibilities.'[3] More specifically, in terms of historical video games, a game's perceptible narrative or ludic affordances, and the limitations placed on a player because of them, can reveal the developer-historian's interpretation of the past, as Chapman argues. While the player has some 'interpretative agency' while experiencing the game, they are already severely limited by the fact these games are of a 'realist simulation style',[4] as previously noted. Furthermore, the foundational 'construction of the *(hi)story-play-space* by the developer-historian […] involves the elimination of other possible *actions* from the text and the meanings and contents these actions might introduce.'[5] These limitations are also confined within the realm of possibility, in terms of what can be perceived (or constructed) as historically 'realistic', 'accurate', or 'authentic', to audiences or by

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[1] Quote from Ted Carson in Gamespot Staff, '*Red Dead Redemption*'.
[2] Quote from Jeronimo Barrera in Cowen, '*L.A. Noire* Developer Interview' [accessed 26 May 2016].
[3] Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, *Video Games As Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 60–61; Also citing Garry Crawford, *Video Gamers* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012), 74.
[4] The consequences of this are discussed in Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 69; chapters 5 and 6.
[5] Emphasis in original text. Ibid., 37.

developers, as Adrienne Shaw argues.[6] In summation, what and how affordances appear in games reveals much about the way the past has been interpreted and subsequently represented in a given historical game. What has, and has not, been included matters, because it suggests what a developer views as a believable inclusion. For Rockstar, these 'realistic' gameplay affordances correspond to the 'authentic' frame of reference they worked to establish before their games were released. Building upon this, this chapter argues that how these affordances and game spaces are marketed to players further reveals the developer-historian's interpretations, and intentions in creating and selling a particular historicised gameplay experience.

This chapter therefore explores how these game spaces and ludological elements incorporate, interact with and represent wider historiographical and cultural discourse, and moreover, how this is externally framed as 'authentic' or 'realistic' by paratexts. It considers certain kinds of overtly performative materials, such as the developer interview and corporate press release, as well as pre-release gameplay videos and trailers, to frame discussions of how the game worlds, and the limits of gameplay options within them, were historicised and sold.

Video game journalism often features interviews with individuals involved in the development process. Certain individuals are attributed cult, or a form of *auteur* status in themselves, as studio heads or those 'known' in popular discourse have a certain kind individual expression that gets encoded into their games.[7] As Clara Fernández-Vara elucidates, '[i]dentifying who has participated in the development of a game can provide us with important information about the influences and the history of the production', and creates certain expectations among fans that staunchly follow a certain developer and their games.[8]

The developer interview seems to function in much the same way as filmmaker interviews, especially those of '*auteur*' directors. Published interviews with directors can be viewed as 'one of the few, documentable extratextual spaces where the auteur, in addressing cults of fans and critical viewers, engages and disperses his or her own

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[6] Shaw, 'The Tyranny of Realism'.

[7] Hideo Kojima, Ken Levine, and David Cage are particularly useful examples of this phenomenon in gaming culture. See for example Amy M. Green, 'Introduction: "Just Another Day in a War Without End": Hideo Kojima and *Metal Gear*', in *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Trauma, and History in Metal Gear Solid V*, by Amy M. Green (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 1–13; Felan Parker, 'Canonizing *Bioshock*: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game', *Games and Culture*, 30 August 2015; Fred Dutton, 'David Cage: Game Auteurs Are Vital', *Eurogamer*, 18 March 2011, http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2011-03-18-david-cage-game-auteurs-are-vital [accessed 1 September 2018].

[8] Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 64.

organizing agency as auteur.' The 'standard directorial interview' can therefore be understood according to the dual, interlocking processes of 'promotion and explanation': 'it is the writing and explaining of a film through the promotion of a certain intentional self; it is frequently the commercial dramatisation of self as the motivating agent of textuality'.[9] This kind of 'promotional authorship' present in the promotion of a range of media texts seeks to 'lend cultural capital to texts via the romantic discourse of vision and self-expression'.[10] Though indeed a marketing strategy intended to 'organise' or manage the way an audience will respond to a media product, it is unlikely to completely 'foreclose' other possible meanings that an individual audience member may generate for themselves. Not quite as extreme then as Barthes's declaration of the 'death of the author',[11] Foucault's 'author function' claimed the author of a text was only one site of potential meaning-making or valuation, useful for readers or viewers, but not the ultimately authority or gatekeeper of meaning.[12] As Gray summarises,

> Ultimately, though Benjamin declared the death of aura, and Roland Barthes declared the death of the author, […] various paratexts have resurrected both aura and author, becoming primary sites for the generation of both as discursive values in today's mediated environment. […] to a certain degree, paratexts can often determine what counts as cinematic and televisual art, aura, and authority, necessitating our close attention to them.[13]

These issues take on a different-yet-interrelated resonance in terms of historical games, whereby representatives of the studio have to function in the role of developer-historian, explaining choices that informed the company's construction of historical representations. Usually not confined to a single figure in a 'directorial' role,[14] a number of individual representatives of a game developer will speak to different news outlets in different capacities; emphasising their role in, for example, narrative, technical, or art direction, depending on the publication and interview context. They seek to convey the kind of 'experience' that games can and will offer. This fits in with the more general trend

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[9] Timothy Corrigan, 'The Commerce of Auterism', in *Film and Authorship*, ed. Virginia Wright Wexman (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 102.
[10] Hadas, 'A New Vision', 48.
[11] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 144–48.
[12] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.
[13] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 83–84; The origins of this debate, and Foucault's role as a median point between Barthes – who sought to deny the author any authority – and the Frankfurt School – who 'would rather' was not dead, for their own purposes – is overviewed in ibid., 109.
[14] Though this is sometimes the case, as in the case of *LAN* and Brendan McNamara's credit as 'Writer & Director'.

in games criticism in the media, in which reviewers attempt to 'examine and convey the *experience* of playing, the *feel* of the world, the *pull* of the narrative, the emotional connection with characters, or the intelligence of the mechanics'.[15] In this way, reviewers treat games as an 'art form rather than a product', an experience that players may or may not choose, 'rather than providing a clear guide on whether or not you should buy a consumer item.'[16] Game developers and critics thus both have a part to play in managing expectations and directing potential player experiences,[17] and how the medium has been perceived (or rather, sold and encourage perceptions of it) as a higher media form, parallel to the romantic discourses of artistry that surround film, television, literature, or music.

Trailers on the other hand are another significant and prevalent form of promotional paratext, oftentimes with interrelated perceptible goals, and therefore are 'a valuable resource in the history of the videogame'.[18] As an audio-visual advertisement for media products, a trailer, among other paratexts, 'serves as a marker of how the industry wants its products to be seen, as an indicator of how the audience is addressed, and is encouraged to see these products.'[19] Trailers and gameplay videos often seek to foreground the same themes and rhetoric that appear in developer interviews or other kinds of promotional paratexts. In Rockstar's case, developer interviews and gameplay trailers feed into their wider, dispersed attempts at generating a discourse of authenticity – historical or otherwise – before the release of their titles.

The gameplay experience on offer in *RDR* and *LAN* is contained within an open world setting; the genre of games Rockstar are synonymous with, as noted in chapter one. The game world itself provides players with one layer of 'framing narrative' that situates them within their particular historical time and place.[20] These open worlds evoke a wide range of attributes and conventions that are intended to be received as 'authentic' to their period and genre. But a second layer of framing narrative – situated paratextually – directs

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[15] Emphasis mine. Keith Stuart, 'Game changers: how the increasing cultural significance of video games is reflected in our coverage', *The Guardian*, 21 July 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2017/jul/21/game-changers-how-the-increasing-cultural-significance-of-video-games-is-reflected-in-our-coverage [accessed 11 July 2018].
[16] Ibid.
[17] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 67; Specific to historical video games, Emil Hammar uses the reviews of two games journalists to explore the way games like *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* may offer the potential for what they term 'counter-hegemonic commemorative play', especially where the histories of race and slavery are concerned. See Hammar, 'Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play'.
[18] Vollans, '"The Most Cinematic Game yet"', 110.
[19] Ibid.; See also Lisa Kernan, *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Keith M. Johnston, *Coming Soon: Film Trailers and the Selling of Hollywood Technology* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009).
[20] Discussed in Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 156–58; Citing Harrison Gish, 'Playing the Second World War: *Call of Duty* and the Telling of History', *Eludamos*, 4.2 (2010), 167-180.

players to specific narrative themes and gameplay options that can be perceived or performed in these spaces, which are historicised and authenticated. It locates the player within that historical context:[21] what they will see, be able to do, and why this is representative of a historical 'truth'. Thus, while a promotional discourse sells an open, historically authentic world that gives players the illusion of freedom and choice within these 'realist' simulations of the past, players' gameplay actions and narrative possibilities are actually confined within limits that Rockstar themselves control, both textually and paratextually. In developer interviews and gameplay videos, Rockstar try to manage expectations by ostensibly offering players the space to generate their own expectations and carry out their own desired experience, while continuing to subtly generate a discourse that suggests what should be received as authentic or faithful about what they can do, and who they can be.

***Red Dead Redemption*: The 'complete Western experience'?**

In the year leading up to May 2010, several senior members of Rockstar's executive, creative, and development departments gave comparatively rare but detailed interviews to major gaming and entertainment news outlets, with the intention of promoting the upcoming release of *RDR*. In the first exclusive a year before release, during 'marathon interview session' with Charles Onyett of *IGN*, Dan Houser – as one of the game's three credited writers – discussed Rockstar's ambitions in making the game. He foregrounded Rockstar's attempts at environmental storytelling, building up a sense of the world through the landscape or the dialogue that Marston and NPCs speak, to embody the kinds of attitudes and values of the time, and encode it with 'realism and believability'.[22] This world was typified by the 'madness and insanity that the American West seemed to have in itself quite realistically', that the tone was supposed to be 'raw and energised', capturing the 'surreal' meeting point between this 'modern' and 'primitive' world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rockstar sought to do so in a more complete way than had been achieved with previous Western video games: 'The weaknesses in previous games were that maybe they could represent one aspect of the Western experience, be it shooting or playing cards or whatever it was, but you couldn't represent the totality, the

[21] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 157; citing Gish, 170-172.
[22] Charles Onyett, '*Red Dead Redemption*: Into the Wild West', *IGN*, 11 May 2009, http://uk.ign.com/articles/2009/05/11/red-dead-redemption-into-the-wild-west?page=1 [accessed 1 November 2015].

full range of Western experiences.'[23] In tune with this, Onyett's editorial comments noted that 'Rockstar hopes it can deliver as close to an all-encompassing videogame Western experience as possible.'[24]

Just under a year later, closer to *RDR*'s release date, Ted Carson – the game's technical director, based at Rockstar San Diego – gave an interview to *Gamespot*, discussing the 'creative process' behind creating gameplay features and the open world.[25] On the one hand, Carson repeated the claim that Rockstar wanted to 'explore things […] that had never been attempted before', and part of that involved choosing this very specific period, comparatively late in the Western's history, as their setting. But here even more so, there is significant slippage between the 'reality' of life in the American West, and the way that the perception of what is 'classic' about this period is informed by cinematic Westerns:

> We really wanted to explore the myths and realities of the Old West– we did plenty of real-world research, from visiting the Library of Congress to road trips to photographing real environments. But we also wanted to look at the myths of the Old West, and so many of those myths are from movies. The one thing we really focused on, above all, was to make sure that we provided, in gameplay, as many classic Western situations as we could think of. These were things we had all seen, but never experienced interactively in a game before—things like Mexican standoffs, driving stagecoaches, taming wild horses, lassoing bandits who are trying to escape, riding with the cavalry, blowing up bridges, hunting buffalo, and so and on. We really wanted the game to offer the complete Western experience interactively and stylistically to show both the idealism and brutal cynicism of the Wild West.[26]

What both of these features again foreground is Rockstar's labour to create such an ambitious, expansive, and authentic game, propping up their brand identity. Rockstar's previous experience and personnel is equated with a readiness to face such a 'challenge', portraying them as a safe pair of hands, so to speak: a company to be trusted to take every care necessary to reconstruct this world, to fill it with seemingly endless possibility, and ensure player satisfaction. They refer back to Rockstar's experience with open world games, and Rockstar's wider brand identity, which creates the expectation for these

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[23] Houser quoted in Charles Onyett, '*Red Dead Redemption*: A Man and His Horse', *IGN*, 8 May 2009, http://uk.ign.com/articles/2009/05/09/red-dead-redemption-a-man-and-his-horse [accessed 1 November 2015].
[24] Ibid.
[25] Gamespot Staff, '*Red Dead Redemption*'.
[26] Ted Carson quoted in Ibid.

attributes and qualities. This framing of the attention paid to make something authentic and realistic – representative of 'what it was really like' – as opposed to inauthentic or outright 'ridiculous', is repeatedly emphasised,[27] suggesting the sincerity and seriousness with which they undertook the task. Indeed, their authority as developer-historian is validated and reiterated, and later calcified by glowing reviews and widespread critical acclaim.

In essence, Houser maintained that Rockstar had endeavoured to create 'not just a kind of classic cowboy experience, but it's a classic cowboy experience as that classic cowboy era is dying out.'[28] Of course, the 'classic cowboy experience' stands in direct opposition to the 'totality' of experiences in the American West. Yet there is a conflation in these promotional discourses between what Rockstar had done – 'real world' research, watching Western films, and so on – and something 'complete', 'classic', and 'all-encompassing.' Indeed, much of this can easily be dismissed as advertising spin; naturally, there is a benefit to claiming that the experience on offer is both completely authentic and inherently better or more expansive than those games that came before, as per the broader logic of marketing. Yet *RDR* was vastly more successful than any Western game that came before, or after, its release.[29] It is therefore worth unpicking the nature of these claims about *RDR*'s world and gameplay, and how they are legitimised and authenticated across dispersed promotional paratexts. What is it that Rockstar sought to claim as 'complete' and 'classic'? What is included, and more pertinently, *excluded* from this discourse of authenticity, and how does it correspond to existing cultural and historiographical discourses?

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[27] References to not wanting situations to feel 'ridiculous' is something Houser especially returns to; for example, in terms of players' inability to undertake missions for the local Sheriff while still being 'WANTED' or having a bounty on their head, or who players can or cannot duel with (other men, largely, not 'nice Mrs Perkins' walking down the road). See Onyett, 'A Man and His Horse'; Onyett, 'Into the Wild West'.

[28] Houser quoted in Onyett, 'A Man and His Horse'.

[29] In addition to the release of *Red Dead Revolver* in 2004, there have been two other notable, mainstream Western game franchises, also released in mid-2000s: *Call of Juarez* (2006-) and *GUN* (2006), both of which have had their own issues with reception and controversy, notably in their representations of people of colour. Controversy over representations of Native Americans was particularly pronounced in the case of *GUN,* to the extent that the Association for American Indian Development launched a boycott of the game for supposedly 'condoning the devastating eradication of North American Indian tribes.' See for example Alexs Krotoski, 'Native Americans File Claim Against *GUN*', *The Guardian,* 15 February 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/ 2006/feb/15/nativeamerican [accessed 23 January 2016]. In the case of *Call of Juarez,* one title in the series, *The Cartel,* was denounced by authorities both in America and in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, who called for a boycott of the game for its portrayal of modern-day crime and cartel violence with a 'Wild West' angle. See Mike Fahey, 'Mexican State Calls for A Ban On *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*', *Kotaku,* 21 February 2011, http://kotaku.com/5766280/mexican-state-calls-for-a-ban-on-call-of-juarez-the-cartel [accessed 23 January 2016].

Authenticating the Open World Western Experience

In an April 2010 interview before *RDR*'s release, Dan Houser mildly contradicted his stated aims at offering the 'classic cowboy experience', proclaiming that 'Westerns are about place […] They're not called outlaw films. They're not even called cowboys-and-Indians films. They're called westerns. They're about geography.'[30] Indeed, *RDR*'s 'geography' and game world were highly commended by critics,[31] and as we have seen, paratexts helped constitute and construct its authenticity.

'Wide open space' is a fundamental component of the Western genre, and of the history of the West of America. As Jane Tompkins argues, this space is highly specific:

> Big Sky Country is a psychological and spiritual place known by definite physical markers. It is the American West, and not just any part of it but the west of the desert, of mountains and prairies, the West of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas, and some parts of California.[32]

Unsurprisingly therefore, central to the 'complete' Western experience Rockstar tried to facilitate through *RDR* is the recreation of a highly specific game world encoded with meaning, ultimately creating a historicised environment facilitated by the spectacle of a spectacular and vast 'open' world: 'for the most part, this is a game about wide-open space, about freedom and discovery,' as one review put it.[33]

The focus on the 'wide open space' of *RDR* began early in the game's promotional cycle. In a 2009 press release from Take-Two, a statement from Sam Houser described the game as 'another milestone for [Rockstar] in the development of open world games'.[34] Indeed, creating such a 'gigantic game world' – the scale of which was speculated to be the largest the company had created to date – was seen as 'of critical importance for the type of game the company wanted *Redemption* to be.'[35] Dan Houser elsewhere repeated these sorts of claims, stating that

> The sense of scale, and the sense of riding across these big areas and exploring these weird corners of the map, that is part of the

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[30] Quoted in Schiesel, 'Way Down Deep in the Wild, Wild West'.
[31] See for example Ibid.; Nielsen, 'How *Red Dead Redemption* Is a Masterclass in Creating Historical Atmosphere'.
[32] Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything,* 4.
[33] Keith Stuart, '*Red Dead Redemption*: hands-on with the final code', *The Guardian,* 4 May 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2010/apr/30/games-gameculture [accessed 25 March 2016].
[34] Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., 'Rockstar Games Announces Release Date for Red Dead Redemption', Press Release, *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.,* 1 December 2009, http://ir.take2games.com /phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1360538 [accessed 5 June 2018].
[35] Onyett, 'A Man and His Horse'.

> experience, just as much as having the shootouts and part of the story and adventure. The act of seeing these beautiful views and discovering them for yourself and feeling like it's enormous and I can go over there and see what's up that hill and see for miles in the distance, that is part of the beauty and fun of the game.[36]

Creating the right 'open', expansive environment that befitted the West in *RDR* was made possible with the development of next-generation consoles (Xbox360, PlayStation 3), and the technological capabilities of the new hardware.[37] As Dan Houser stated, '[o]bviously one of the things that we decided we would love to do is a game where countryside was rendered beautifully, because that was very difficult on a [PlayStation2] to make these big, open environments that look fantastic.'[38]

The result of using the new technologies available to them to render an expansive and open Western environment has won *RDR* much critical acclaim. Indeed, this kind of technology seemed to answer questions as to why a Western game had not succeeded in achieving such a feat before. *The Guardian's* Keith Stuart commented that 'Until now, the technology hasn't been there to replicate the scale of a John Ford landscape. It's much easier to model a skyscraper than a tree. Or indeed a cactus.'[39] Even five years after the game's release, (and, moreover, after the next generation of consoles with better technical specifications had again been established), *Kotaku* featured *RDR* in an article exploring 'What Makes Open Worlds Work?', describing the way the game's environment

> beautifully captures the romantic image of the cinematic Wild West, but also its rugged, real side; part Sergio Leone, part *Deadwood* [HBO, 2004-2006]. Watching the terrain change and the colours shift as you ride across it – from snowy mountains to sun-baked deserts – is wonderfully transporting. It's atmosphere, and the sense of place it creates, that makes Red Dead's world work. A sense of history is also important, to create the illusion that a world hasn't just suddenly spirited into existence, but was there long before the player arrived.[40]

Here, two issues fundamental to the Western genre are evoked: a sense of place and the illusion of it being 'real', and the sense of 'history' this environment comes encoded with, simply through the visual presentation of a landscape which is meant to be an experiential reimagining of the West. However, both of the above pieces actually ascribe a sense of

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[36] Quoted in ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Stuart, '*Red Dead Redemption*: the best video game ever?'.
[40] 'What Makes Open Worlds Work?', *Kotaku*, 14 November 2015, http://www.kotaku.co.uk/2015/11/14/what-makes-open-worlds-work [accessed 15 November 2015]. Leone is also cited in this sense in Stuart, '*Red Dead Redemption*: the best video game ever?'.

'reality' to filmic recreations of the West,[41] and so the 'sense of history' is more ethereal and intangible. Jonathan Stubbs discusses how the 'creation of spectacle', especially in epic and other types of historical cinema, 'is closely related to the development of film technology, and for many decades the genre has been closely identified with innovations in production and exhibition techniques.'[42] What he also discusses, however, is the privilege of a sense of visual 'authenticity' created by historical films: creating a 'field of historicality', as Vivian Sobchack defined, which immerses the viewer (or in this case, player) within 'the feeling of being in the past'.[43] Accordingly, these images of the West are immediately understandable to players – reliant as they are on a combination of the 'romantic' and 'rugged' images 'of the cinematic Wild West.'

Slotkin argues that the cinematic tradition of the Frontier was heavily dependent on a 'Buffalo Bill' brand of authenticity, as filmmakers essentially made movies which were 'little more than a cinematic version of Cody's Wild West re-enactment', combining 'scenes and stories drawn from the traditions of dime novels and stage melodrama with authentic details of costume and scenery'.[44] However, Cody drew his inspiration from and sought to recreate the lived experiences of himself and his actors to create his own brand of historical authenticity – figures like Annie Oakley and Sitting Bull, for example, however embellished they may have been. Yet cinema was much more preoccupied with the mimetic use of specific visuals to create this sense of authentic reality. Thus, initial conceptions of 'the West' drawn from 'painting, popular literature, and stage plays, as well as Wild West shows',[45] were gradually replaced by 'movie images', insistently reproduced in the mass media, which were 'purporting to represent American history and the West'.[46] These images were 'vivid', and more importantly, *'memorable'*:

> What became essential to the creation of an illusion of authenticity and historicity was not the presence of a 'real old-time outlaw' or 'Last Stand Survivor,' but the establishment of a set of habitual associations between image and idea that would

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[41] In Keith Stuart's initial review of *RDR* after playing the final version of the game a few days before its release, similarly remarked that 'the first time I whistled for my horse and it galloped toward me, muscles rippling, utterly convincing animation…that was it, I was in. For the first ten minutes, I just trotted up and down the dusty streets of Armadillo, lapping up the perfectly replicated Western iconography; the lone rider slowly sauntering into town, the drunken gunmen lounging on the steps of the saloon, the prostitutes languidly promenading the balconies, the balls of tumbleweed blowing past'. See Stuart, '*Red Dead Redemption*: hands-on with the final code'.
[42] Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction,* 144.
[43] Ibid; Sobchack, 'Surge and Splendor', 294.
[44] See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 235-237.
[45] Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein, 'Introduction', in Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein, *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Sound Era* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1-20, 4.
[46] Slotkin, G*unfighter Nation,* 235-237.

> ultimately constitute a code or language of cinematic symbols, understood by both filmmaker and audience as referring to or symbolizing 'the historical West' or 'the real thing.' In the end, the culture as a whole would remember the West in terms of movie images and would 'validate' new representations by measuring them against the 'authority' of genre conventions.[47]

What Slotkin discusses here – authenticity validated or invalidated by popular memory of a cinematic West – appears to also be the kind of validation that critical acclaim of *RDR* is dependent upon. Thus, the extent to which it 'looks' like a Western, and therefore making it appear historical, is fundamental to the game's ultimate success. What *RDR*'s environment is not dependent upon, however, is a physical connection to a specific place. Unlike the way that cinema uses photography or actual, really life moving images or actors – however selective this construction of place undoubtedly is – *RDR* is a vast, computer-generated environment envisaged, created and accessed in fundamentally different ways to that of cinematic Westerns. Rockstar's success, therefore, is arguably owing to their ability to recreate a pre-existing landscape that is deeply encoded with certain meanings and a sense of place, in digital form, and moreover, while virtual as opposed to 'real', it still ensures the audience's sense of recognition of these very specific memory images, and the historical associations inherent within them.

Studlar and Bernstein suggest that 'in no small part due to the iconography of [John] Ford's Westerns', the genre is 'one of the most instantly recognizable […] in the history of cinema'.[48] Ford created multiple 'fictions' in one 'real' place, Monument Valley, ultimately enabling audience recognition of a particular kind of place encoded with specific meanings, contributing to 'the notion of extended rhetoric in its widest sense'.[49] Thus it is possible to ensure that these locations 'in themselves might create an association between an image and an idea', an audience 'memory' of a specific 'Western' space, in addition to the possible emotional and decorative functions they serve. Edward Buscombe similarly discussed how the success of early Westerns at least, was dependent on their relatively 'authentic' look – which, more often than not, meant that they 'had' to

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[47] Ibid.
[48] Studlar and Bernstein, 'Introduction', 3.
[49] Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, 'John Ford and Monument Valley', in Buscombe and Pearson, eds., *Back in the Saddle Again*, 160.

be American Westerns, and stories which were set in an 'authentic' location of 'the West'.[50]

Yet Rockstar created their historical fiction within another fictionalised version of the 'real West'. The idea of 'authenticity' where it relates to *RDR* is therefore made more unstable due to the fact that the game world is a predominantly composite environment. Rockstar incorporated into the different 'territories' of *RDR*'s world a variety of landscapes: snowy mountains and forests, wide open deserts, canyons, and expanses of water; not restricting its 'vision' of the West to only one particular place, but also claiming to pay reference to the photographs and archival images the creators apparently consulted before creating this environment.[51] Using certain spaces that had already been encoded with meaning by filmmakers allowed Rockstar to co-opt and composite them into their own space, from which to make new and reinforce old meanings in a space which the audience will be both familiar with and understand.

Not reliant on specific locations to 'shoot' footage, Rockstar had the total freedom to make something as 'authentic' or inauthentic as they wanted. Rockstar chose to invent a U.S.-Mexico borderland, allegorical of several states, to make their 'real West'. The three explorable territories, New Austin, West Elizabeth, and Nuevo Paraiso, comprise several individual and contrasting map areas, with different terrains representative of a mix of American states: mountains, forests, open plains, deserts, and more. Their relationship to the geography and terrain of 'real' American states is vivid enough for players to record their features on sites like the Red Dead Wiki.[52] This is what

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[50] Edward Buscombe, 'Inventing Monument Valley: Nineteenth Century Landscape Photography and the Western Film' (1995), in Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, eds., *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 116.

[51] Mike Snyder, '"Red Dead Redemption" Q&A with Rockstar's Dan Houser', 26 May 2010, *USA Today,* http://content.usatoday.com/communities/gamehunters/post/2010/05/red-dead-redemption-qa-with-rockstars-dan-houser-1/1#.Vh_GKrzcqlI [accessed 1 May 2016].

[52] For example, New Austin 'resembles aspects of several real Southwestern U.S. states. Cholla Springs resembles Arizona's desert with its saguaro cactus, desert scrub, and prickly pears. The scrub desert of Rio Bravo is strongly reminiscent of New Mexico. Gaptooth Ridge is more like Southern California, Nevada, and western Arizona with its tan rocks and Trees, and Hennigan's Stead is resembles[*sic*] the western parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, central Colorado, and the square part of Texas called the Panhandle Plains, with the Eastern end (Stillwater Creek) resembling the The South comprising of North Texas, East Texas, and Louisiana.' Subsection 'Geography' in article 'New Austin', *Red Dead Wiki,* http://reddead.wikia.com/wiki/New_Austin [accessed 29 November 2015]. Similarly, West Elizabeth is seen to reflect 'various states in the Western United States. The eastern portion…resembles, and is named after, the Great Plains while the western portion (Tall Trees area) resembles the front range states along the Rocky Mountains'. Subsection 'Trivia' in article 'West Elizabeth', *Red Dead Wiki,* http://reddead.wikia.com/wiki/West_Elizabeth [accessed 29 November 2015]. The Nuevo Paraiso territory is seen as having 'elements from the western border states Chihuahua, Sonora and Baja California.' Subsection 'Trivia' in article 'Nuevo Paraiso', *Red Dead Wiki*, http://reddead.wikia.com/wiki/Nuevo_Parais [accessed 29 November 2015].

'the West' has become: a set of images that even blended together in visual fictions are nonetheless understood as 'authentic'.

Here it becomes relevant to again explore Rockstar's wider history of (re)mediating American spaces. Focussing on two earlier *GTA* titles – *GTAVC* and *GTA: San Andreas* (2004) – Bogost and Klainbaum write that '[d]espite the apparent credibility' of the 'large, semi-realistic urban environments of the *GTA* series, these environments are not recreations of real urban locales, but rather remixed, hybridized cities fashioned from popular culture's notions of real American cities.'[53] Whereas other games which have tried to replicate American cities have 'neglect[ed] many of the sensual and cognitive ways place is experienced',[54] Rockstar's mediation of 'real' American spaces presupposes a knowledge of them established by wider, popular visual media.[55] This therefore enables an experience of the 'city as place instead of map'.[56] A *GTA* game can 'express the complex notion of place' because it does not 'solely focus on the physical attributes of a place, such as specific buildings or streets, but […] also express a more complex understanding of place that includes cultural codes and popular symbols.'[57] Indeed, these games and their worlds offer such unique and compelling experiences precisely because they have taken into consideration the kinds of knowledge people will have of these cities (or spaces) *because of* their mediated, *not* lived experiences of them.

And this is precisely why these virtual spaces are able to create such a poignant sense of 'being in a specific city', exploring 'familiar yet fictional streets'.[58] Rockstar have banked on the fact that the people who seek out and play their games will already be familiar with America through popular culture ('*Americana*'), perhaps as well as (but not solely) *actual* experience. And as such, they are able to imbue in their virtual hybrid cities a greater sense of what it is like to *be* in these American cities.[59] Bogost and Klainbaum maintain that these games contain 'sophisticated symbolic spatial representations' that create a 'sense of presence', the 'power' of which 'cannot be overlooked.'[60]

Yet the consequences of these remediations of Western space, and the influence of Rockstar's 'recommendations' to players, are felt in the way that these spaces are almost

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[53] Bogost and Klainbaum, 'Experiencing Place in Los Santos and Vice City', 162.
[54] Ibid., 174.
[55] For example, creating a in *GTAVC* a version of Miami that 'is more representative of the 1980s television cop drama *Miami Vice* than of the city of Miami', and in *GTASA* Los Santos, a city that is 'more representative of […] *Boyz n the Hood* [1991]' than the actual Los Angeles in the 1990s'. Ibid.
[56] Ibid., 166-170.
[57] Ibid. 174.
[58] Ibid., 162.
[59] Ibid., 175.
[60] Ibid., 175.

entirely devoid, in both the game world and promotional discourses, of those long 'othered' by Westerns and Western history. Enclosed with the physical packaging of *RDR* is a pull-out map of the entire game world, which offers players a sense of the expansiveness of *RDR*'s 'Western Border States' and the area 'South of the Border'. The descriptions that accompany these divisions are instructive, constructing a sense of history as well as a sense of place. The 'Western Border States' are painted as 'far from civilised, and outlaws and dangerous animals still have the upper hand here...Newcomers are advised to stay close to the roads, as travel is mostly safe only for the adventurous and well-armed'.[61] This physical document instructs the players where different kinds of animals might be found in specific areas of *RDR*'s virtual territories, as well as using a 'handwritten' cross symbol to denote places where possible 'danger' may lie. Immediately this Western space is characterised as a volatile, 'uncivilised' landscape meant only for the most capable of 'adventurers' – that is, the player who chooses to play *RDR* and take on its 'challenges'.

On the other hand, 'South of the Border' is indeed a Mexican territory, but is not named as such on the map. Rather it is referred to as an expansive and red, sun-scorched terrain, where 'there is talk of a civil war or some kind of uprising' occurring: the map advises 'tread carefully'.[62] This map aims to prefigure or extend the inherent character of the expansive space that becomes the player's playground. It also embeds within this virtual landscape an implicit sense of history. This is a land that is, though on the verge of 'civilisation', still *un*civilised; mapped, but not tamed. It also suggests to players what kind of person can be found there – or indeed, can survive there. There is of course something to be said about the way this implicitly 'others' and marginalises these non-American spaces (and their peoples), exoticising this space and coding its inhabitants as both unknown and uncivilised, yet waiting for the intrepid player – via the game's white-male protagonist – to explore it. The ideological assumptions of 'civility' (and its opposite) arguably expose the legacy of the white-supremacist underpinnings of the Western (and Western history), when they are used casually to support a wider promotional narrative of danger and player challenge.[63]

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[61] The map I refer to was included with the physical release of *RDR* for PlayStation 3 consoles in 2010.
[62] Ibid.
[63] The colonialist and orientalist underpinnings beneath many open world games, as well as video games in general, is explored in, for example, Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism*.

To develop this point further, this chapter continues to argue that more explicitly promotional paratexts, and the game-text itself, work in concert with each other to evoke a sense of Western authenticity; and a highly selective one at that.

'This is what life in the West was like. This is *Red Dead Redemption.*'[64]

As explored above, the game's promotional discourses keenly reiterate and focus on Rockstar's branded, boundary-pushing open world creation, and reliance on 'real world' research, while the in-game world blends together a series of 'authentic', recognisably-western locations drawn from as-wide-as-possible a variety of previous cinematic depictions of these historic spaces. As per Klinger's consumable identity, these varying 'digressions' – the shoring up of 'dispersed' intertextual references into a cohesive new space and narrative – aim to draw in the largest possible audience – Rockstar fans and/or culturally-literate fans.[65] This brand image, and the promotion of limitless spaces with limitless potential for experience, bound up with the cinematic preconception of the Western genre, is similarly evident in the promotion and historicisation of gameplay actions players could undertake as John Marston.

In the run up to *RDR*'s release Rockstar published a number of trailers, which appeared on both the game's official website, and the YouTube accounts for Rockstar Games and IGN. Titled 'gameplay video series', these short trailers contained in-game sequences and male-gendered, non-diegetic voiceover, providing viewers with information about gameplay elements and *RDR's* historical setting. Offering a general introduction to the game and the experience it would offer, largely the same core themes present in the *Newswire* blogs are reinforced here.

These trailers again sought to emphasise Rockstar's labour: they had 'set out to capture the essence of the Old West in their first open world game set in a rural environment.'[66] Repeated reference is made to how spectacular and overwhelming the game world is. Appealing to the senses, various claims were made about the way Rockstar endeavoured to 'create a world that feels as vast as the West itself', a world that would be

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[64] 'Red Dead Redemption Gameplay Series: Life in The West', uploaded by Rockstar Games, *YouTube,* 17 March 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okt98KhYK7Q&list=PL9B578F2B58812A33&index=14 [accessed 26 March 2018].
[65] Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema'.
[66] 'Red Dead Redemption Gameplay Video Series: Introduction', uploaded by Rockstar Games, *YouTube*, 15 December 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF--MmPVh-A&list=PL9B578F2B58812A33&index=19 [accessed 26 March 2018].

perceived as 'living' and 'breathing.'[67] As indeed a kind of 'first word' on the game,[68] these trailers attempt to innately code *RDR*'s content (which players until that point had no personal access to) with a sense of spectacle. Moreover, the voiceover combined with select visuals suggests how Rockstar envisages players eventually interacting with the game. All of the performative gesturing here to Rockstar's 'ambition' for the game, and care and effort in undertaking its development, is grounded in the same kind of promotional historicising found in the wider marketing discourse for the game. Players are told how and why these exclusive early access visuals of the game correspond to historical 'realities' or 'truths.'

Emphasising the same core themes as the *Newswire* posts – violence and brutality, governmental oppression, and the influence of technology on the development of 'the West' – Rockstar attempted, at this different paratextual site, to offer their interpretation of the history of the American West, and what life there 'was like.' Describing the nature of everyday life in the west, one trailer explained that it was 'unforgiving', and that 'violence was a constant presence.'[69] Another claimed that 'this was a world still led mostly by fire, a world of violence, survival, and war.'[70] Authentication and justification for the game's significant gameplay affordances and innately 'realist-reconstructionist' simulation style are explicitly sought by comparing the ways in which they correspond to supposed historical reality: for example, the way players navigate the world by travelling in stagecoaches or on horseback, that hunting 'was a vital means of survival in the West', and that reading newspapers or listening to NPC conversations will give players a sense of their current place in the game's fictional world, and how it responds to their actions.[71]

Once again, the degree to which these gameplay elements are 'historical' is intentionally intermingled with Rockstar's selling of the game: 'The goal of [*RDR*] is to push the boundaries of the open world game. Engage the player with constant action and opportunity, and tell the story of a world losing both its innocence and its freedom.'[72] The expected sensual experience of it and its affordances are inextricably embedded in this wider discourse of historical authenticity. These trailers function to intertwine

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[67] 'Gameplay Video Series: Life in the West'.
[68] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*.
[69] 'Red Dead Redemption Video Series: Life in the West Part II', uploaded by Rockstar Games, *Youtube*, 2 April 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mc8ptmcCHMI&list=PL9B578F2B58812A33&index=12 [accessed 26 March 2018].
[70] 'Gameplay Video Series: Life in the West'.
[71] Ibid.
[72] 'Gameplay Video Series: Life in The West Part II'.

Rockstar's brand and labour, their provision of gameplay affordances and fictional world for the player, with the continued maintenance of a discourse of historical authenticity.

This is, however, a vision of 'life in the West' tailored specifically to meet Rockstar's needs, and is largely an historical fallacy. As Karen Jones and John Wills overview,

> Envisioning the West as an eminently violent domain […] ignores a wide range of evidence that points to a more peaceful and complex frontier experience. The number of recorded shootouts falls some way short of the fictive roll-call. While firearm ownership, especially after the Civil War, was common on the frontier, possessing a gun did not equate to gunning down all and sundry. The availability of guns often encouraged greater awareness of the need for common sense and sometimes codes of conduct […] Violence proved the exception not the social norm.[73]

However, the press exploited 'the most sensational stories', to suggest that 'frontier towns [were] hotbeds of bloodshed.'[74] Boosters of towns like Dodge City and gun manufacturers also recognised the usefulness of cultivating a reputation of the West as an inherently violent place. The gun held excellent 'potential' for storytelling or 'myth-making', to sell these spaces to potential visitors, or sell their products with a certain mysticism. By encoding these Western spaces and material culture as embodying 'values of self-reliance, individualism and self determination', they were commodified to contemporary consumers.[75] In the same way, Rockstar use this kind of myth-making to capitalise on a faux-historicism of the West as an inherently violent place defined by gun violence, validating their choice and selection of historical themes and elements, marshalling them into a game that suits their own inclinations and brand identity. Rockstar claim in this trailer that 'weapons of the period were meticulously researched' to justify the inclusion of such a range of them that players may collect and utilise in a variety of combat situations,[76] supporting claims of offering 'the complete Western experience'. Yet the ability to collect and use this variety was not actually representative of Western realities, despite the fact that these individual elements are framed as

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[73] Jones and Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions*, 69.
[74] Ibid., 69.
[75] Ibid., 70–71.
[76] 'Red Dead Redemption Gameplay Video Series: Weapons & Death', uploaded by Rockstar Games, *YouTube*, 28 January 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDPxTdaY3BU&list=PL9B578F2B58812A33&index=18 [accessed 26 March 2018].

authentic. It is symptomatic of promotional media's aims in 'trying to ensure that something occurs by dint of announcing it'.[77]

More specifically, who players can be, in addition to what they can do, also falls prey to this kind of commodifying. Marston is the only playable option, largely interacts with other white men, and his story is written entirely around and because of his experience as a former outlaw. While it draws on the currency of the Western as the realm of 'gun-toting cowboys', this albeit 'familiar image'

> sits somewhat uneasily with a more realistic, complicated and often drab frontier experience. Viewing the West through a gun barrel inevitably focused attention on themes of justice and death, but filtered out other key elements of frontierism, ignoring greater roles played by capitalism, resource extraction, home building, agriculture and schooling. The story of the gun made for an interesting and exceptional West, but left little room for peaceful expansion. Life in cattle towns never revolved around the revolver. The dramatic vision of the American West as a realm of perpetual violence rarely reflected historical incidences. Instead, it elucidated the victory of fiction over circumstance.[78]

While *RDR* indeed includes all of the above themes in its overarching narrative in myriad ways, they are all used as the foundations to what are gameplay options which are inherently violent in action. That is, it is during the moments of comparative player passivity – watching cinematic cutscenes, largely – that these themes are developed, with them rarely straying into the actual mechanics and available gameplay actions players can undertake. The choice of Marston as a central character – his characterisation and backstory – is necessarily used as the justification for the gameplay actions, explaining why he, and therefore the player, can be necessarily and successfully violent – depending on the player's skill. Yet this must be also historicised, a paratextual performance based on a largely marginalising selection of historical themes for the sake of commodification – just as the history of 'the West' has always been selectively commercialised.

Arguably, there are other characters besides Marston in this narrative, who accompany him/the player in undertaking gameplay actions and missions toward objective completion and narrative progression. Furthermore, if players so choose, they could have played as a woman, Native American, or other non-Marston character in the game's online multiplayer mode. But these character skins – which have a predetermined

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[77] Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials'.
[78] Jones and Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions*, 72.

'look' and a limited number of soundbites they can repeat – are not afforded their own place in a detailed Rockstar-curated narrative. It is the burden of the player should they wish to use one of these non-white or non-male characters as their online avatar to play against others, or roam around the world and create their own emergent historical narrative.[79] There is no predetermined depth to this; it is not Rockstar's design to offer a playable-protagonist that is not resolutely white and male. These playable character options have no identity beyond their physical, surface level designation as female or non-white male.

Thus while the game's online mode might allow space for the more contentious possibility of the 'player-historian',[80] and the ability to use Rockstar's constructed game space to make their own narrative, it can never conflict with what Rockstar has prefigured. This game, where it has any depth at all, remains Marston's story. As much as it does incorporate a high level of detail about historical processes and change in the early-twentieth century West, it does not reconstruct any kind of 'complete' narrative of the 'Western experience' in the past. It is history only as Rockstar can or are demanded to tell it in keeping with the limitations of their own brand. The nature of the game(play) and Rockstar's brand identity demand a playable protagonist that fits the circumstance 'authentically' and purposefully. All of this is crystallised in the final shot of the third gameplay trailer, in which Rockstar's logo is imprinted over a freeze-frame image of Marston wielding one of the guns that 'made the west': a Rockstar-approved image of Western authenticity (figure. 8):

[79] The same can be said for the far more lucrative and ongoing phenomenon of *GTA Online*; in this scenario, though Rockstar are clear to use female player characters in much of their promotion of the game, they similarly have no predetermined identity (or voice, for that matter), beyond how players choose to embody them. While this is perhaps more freeing in terms of offering potential for emergent narratives, it again leaves the onus of representation in this world on those who wish to play against the 'norm'.
[80] See Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 8. Final frame of gameplay trailer 'weapons and death'.[81]

There are many possible gameplay actions that can be taken in *RDR*. But there is little gesturing in these videos to the fact that Marston (and therefore the player) at certain points is required, or offered the chance, to herd cattle, break horses, protect ranches, teach his son to hunt and be an 'honest rancher': all things that reside in and protect a relatively, if not entirely domestic Western space. Yet while the game is filled with a comparative richness of gameplay affordances – some compulsory, others left to players to construct emergent historical narratives from – what underpins all of these gameplay options is violent masculinity, and the sense that this is a world that is overwhelmingly brutal and hostile. Mission objectives to protect domestic space always end in bloodshed and a high body count. Almost every bit of the players progression of the world is wrought by violence and gunplay, the same myth-making apparent at the time, about the 'gun(s) that made the West', persists here to encode this world as necessitating only violence to survive.

What Rockstar offer, then, is a kind of digitised lament for the possibilities of the 'Frontier' for which Frederick Jackson Turner's generation of historians were nostalgic.[82] But this is not the 'complete Western experience'. It is only complete in terms of the gameplay affordances Rockstar wanted to offer, and offers only a very specific white male perspective on America's Western past, with little chance to resist its totality.

[81] 'Gameplay Video Series: Weapons & Death' [Taken 23 April 2018].
[82] Nash, *Creating the West*, 5–6.

L.A. Noire: 'a new genre of video games'

From the very first press release published by Take-Two in 2006, detailing Rockstar's involvement with the project that became *LAN*, their aspirations for what the game would and should become were made explicit:

> [*LAN*] blends action, detection and complex storytelling and draws players into an open-ended challenge to solve a series of gruesome murders. Set in a perfectly recreated Los Angeles before freeways, with a post-war backdrop of corruption, drugs and jazz, [*LAN*] will truly blend cinema and gaming.[83]

A later press release further set the scene: that *LAN* would be '[s]et amid the violence and corruption of post-World War II Los Angeles.'[84] From the start there was speculation (and repeated, systematic emphasis in the game's wider marketing) that *LAN* was set to achieve what no game had done before, by blending media that for years had been converging. Much of this manufactured perception hinged on the development and use of 'gamechanging' MotionScan technology. *LAN's* release was therefore supposed to herald 'a new genre of video games', rather than 'another, you know, crime GTA-style game based in Los Angeles', in the words of Rockstar's VP of Product Development, Jeronimo Barrera.[85] This technology was created and designed to capture the intricacies of the performances of 'real' Hollywood actors into high-definition, virtual detail, played back on screen, facilitating a game experience which as the game's director, Team Bondi's Brendan McNamara described, 'was wrapped up in those interrogation scenes that you get in TV shows or film, when the audience is able to read people's faces […] and see whether they believe them, or sympathise…'[86]

LAN was ultimately intended to be 'immersive', with Rockstar wanting players to 'feel part of the world.'[87] Yet in an interview with Keith Stuart for *The Guardian,* Barrera also claimed that Rockstar was seeking to build upon the success of other franchises like *Mass Effect*, whose developing studio Bioware 'really know how to work conversation

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[83] Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc, 'Rockstar Games Announces L.A. Noire', Press Release, *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.*, 26 September 2006, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=908815 [accessed 5 June 2018].
[84] 'Rockstar Games Announces Release Dates for L.A. Noire', Press Release, *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.,* 24 January 2011, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1518926 [accessed 5 June 2018].
[85] Quote from Jeronimo Barrera in Cowen, '*L.A. Noire* developer interview'.
[86] Quote from Brendan McNamara in ibid.
[87] Jeronimo Barrera quoted in ibid.

systems.' Barrera claimed that 'we wanted to take it a step further and actually have that human element that can be missing from those games – the ability to see a performance rather than a puppet on screen.'[88] To infer that there was something 'human' or realistic missing from games like *Mass Effect* is an interesting position to take. After all, without wishing to enter into a prolonged debate about what the 'human element' in video games might actually mean, titles like *Mass Effect* – or *Dragon Age*, another Bioware franchise – are built around the player forming their own character: choosing their gender and appearance (within pre-determined limits), choosing dialogue options to a much greater extent than players are afforded in *LAN*, and cultivating relationships, even romances, with NPCs.[89] What this piece of promotional rhetoric seems to imply is that by using actors and motion-capturing their performances lends this 'human' element to the gameplay, despite the game having a far more limited range of choices and possible gameplay outcomes than other video games which explicitly revolve *around* making choices. Games like *Mass Effect* – though sci-fi in genre, set in the future, and in space – do far more to interrogate what is 'human', and offer 'human' interactions in a number of social, domestic, political, and cultural scenarios than *LAN*.

This is another attempt at generating a discourse of cinematic authenticity to add value to the game experience on offer, under another guise, one offering 'human' interaction. Yet this human interaction is ultimately all controlled and predestined to fit within Team Bondi and Rockstar's narrative design and goals. These are, after all, actors performing lines and roles, in the same way that *Mass Effect*'s 'puppets' are voiced by actors playing roles. Aside from reading facial expressions and making 'right' or 'wrong' choices, the 'human' input in the game is only allowed insofar as it works within these limits, and never disrupts the prefigured gameplay experience.

'*Sometimes there's no better substitute than real life*'[90]: the 'Real' Space of 1947 Los Angeles

[88] Jeronimo Barrera in Keith Stuart, '*L.A. Noire*: The Interview', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2011/may/11/la-noire-exclusive-interview [accessed 25 May 2016].

[89] Gender configuration has increasingly become one of Bioware's marketing strategies for the franchise. See Leandro Augusto Borges Lima, 'Configurative Dynamics of Gender in Bioware's Marketing for the Mass Effect Franchise', *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2017).

[90] Quote from Simon Wood, Team Bondi's Production Designer, in 'Behind the Scenes of L.A. Noire's Painstaking Production Design: Part One – Locations & Set Design'.

The promotion of *RDR*'s open world and gameplay affordances suggested that the world, and what players could do within it, were evocative of the 'complete western experience', directly mimicking or meant to represent 'classic' Western films and action. And where *RDR*'s promotional buzzwords were 'reality' or 'classic', *LAN*'s were similarly 'faithful' and 'accurate'. As noted, many of the reviews and features published on the game deal with it as if it were the peak of the medium's convergence with cinema; as though it were the ultimate 'interactive movie', the game that finally bridged the gap, 'blurred the line' between the media. However, *LAN*'s promotional discourse struggles to negotiate between trying to generate discourses of historical and cinematic authenticity, at times unable to separate the two. While it undoubtedly relies on *film noir* as a backdrop for player recognition, it also explicitly defines itself in terms of the historical accuracy the world players navigate through. Though the small print of *LAN's* physical packaging contains a note similar to those found on other Rockstar games — 'This is a fictional story set in 1940s Los Angeles depicting invented and fictionalised historical characters, groups, locations, scenes and events in a manner that is not historically accurate and should not be interpreted as factual'[91] — this legal disclaimer appears as the only aberration to all of the ways in which the game was promoted and critically described as a 'faithful' reproduction of its historical context, laying claim to being a 'new type of game that makes players see through a detective's eyes in 1940s Los Angeles'.[92]

Press releases explicitly describe *LAN* as a game which facilitated 'interaction and immersion within a painstakingly detailed 1940s Los Angeles'.[93] One of the game's main menu screens includes an 'Interesting Facts' section, which seems only to contain one piece of information: 'The Heart of 1947 LA is downtown and in this area about 90% of the buildings have been faithfully recreated, both architecturally and the signage'.[94] These claim for 'faithful' recreation are affirmed by numerous articles published by various news outlets that informed players of the 'Hardcore Archival Research' conducted by Team

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[91] Text taken from the physical edition for PlayStation3 (2011). Indeed, this kind of disclaimer is present in slightly different wording on the back covers of all of the physical packaging for Rockstar's titles, as well as, very often, appearing on screen when players load up the games themselves. It usually also includes a line that notes the creators 'do not in any way endorse, condone, or encourage engaging in any conduct depicted in this videogame', understandable given their history of attracting controversy over the things these titles allow players to see and do.

[92] Quote from Sam Houser in Take Two Interactive Software, Inc., 'Rockstar Games Announces L.A. Noire for the PC', *Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc.,* 23 June 2011, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1578005 [accessed 5 June 2018].

[93] Ibid.

[94] This information can be found under the heading of 'Did You Know?' on the Rockstar Social Club menu area, where players can go to compare their in-game performance to other players.

Bondi during *LAN's* development.[95] One such news article by Nathan Masters[96] explores the interaction between 'real' historical archives and the processes behind the creation of *LAN,* again describing the game's recreation of its historical Los Angeles setting as 'faithful', while going into detail about the types of sources employed by Team Bondi's research team to create their setting.[97] In identifying this level of dedication to 'historical accuracy', Masters describes how this game has facilitated the spread of the rich and diverse history of Los Angeles 'to a new medium, and to a new generation eager to sleuth around the harsh shadows of the City of Angels'.[98] In a similar article Alexis Madrigal goes so far as to advocate the release of these digital/virtual maps to a wider audience, for more diverse, even educational purposes: to 'students of LA history'.[99]

Other reviews claimed authenticity for *LAN's* reconstruction of this historic game space in more personal, affective ways. An article by Chris Donlan described playing *LAN* with his father – who had grown up in Los Angeles in the 1940s, and whose grandfather had himself been a beat cop in that decade. Framed around the transgenerational memories of one family with 'real' lived experience of Los Angeles, Donlan noted that his father wasn't 'hooked' by the game's narrative, but by recognising landmarks of the city, as though he were back in their 'presence' over fifty years later. Donlan's father found it such an 'affecting' experience, that he was compelled to document in his own words.[100] At these wider paratextual sites within the game's wider promotional surround there exist repeated affirmations that support Team Bondi/Rockstar's internally-communicated message that they had managed to virtually encapsulate personally mediated memories of the city as it was. It seems to evoke the

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[95] Alexis C. Madrigal, 'The Hardcore Archival Research Behind "L.A. Noire"', *The Atlantic,* 6 June 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/06/the-hardcore-archival-research-behind-la-noire/239964/ [accessed 25 September 2015].

[96] Significantly, Masters' biographical information in the article notes that he is 'managing editor of *Lost LA*, an original public television series from KCET and the USC Libraries. His writings focus on the evolution of Los Angeles' built and natural environments'.

[97] The sources cited bear resemblance to those listed in the 'Credits' section of *LAN's* physical game booklet: maps found at the Huntington Library, aerial photography from UCLA's Geography department, U.S. Geological Survey topographies. Raymond Chandler's papers held in the UCLA Young Research Library, newspaper articles from the Los Angeles Public Library which 'provided real life antecedent for the fictional crime stories depicted in the game', as well as information on the very real character of Mickey Cohen who is pivotal to the game's narrative, and other both academic and commercial visual sources to be found in collections such as the Dick Whittington Studio's Collection. See Nathan Masters, 'How Archivists Helped Video Game Designers Recreate the City's Dark Side for "L.A. Noire"', *KCET*, 19 May 2011, http://www.kcet.org/updaily/socal_focus/history/how-archivists-helped-video-game-designers-recreate-the-citys-dark-side-in-la-noire-33822.html [accessed 25 September 2015].

[98] Ibid.

[99] Madrigal, 'The Hardcore Archival Research Behind "L.A. Noire"'.

[100] Though originally published in 2012, the article was republished by Eurogamer in 2017 to coincide with *LAN*'s rerelease. See Christian Donlan, 'Night and the City', *Eurogamer*, 17 October 2012, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-10-09-night-and-the-city [accessed 20 August 2016].

kind of 'image of the city' Kevin Lynch has described: 'Every citizen has had long associations with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings.'[101] These memories have power, and indeed resonance within the realm of the personal.

This discourse of authenticity is echoed in and sustained by academic assessments of *LAN* too. For example, Jedd Hakimi explores how *LAN*'s construction of space is directly indebted to cinematic, *film noir* representations of Los Angles in the 1940s, by connecting the game to a specific kind of post-war 'semi documentary' style of police procedural *film noir* and how both subsequently attempt to 'document' the city itself.[102] Hakimi notes the ways in which both the spatial representations and the gameplay experience of the city in *LAN* are explicitly designed to 'feel reminiscent of *film noir*', intentionally deployed to make it appear 'authentic' and recognisable through this mediated lens, and how the game – like this particular kind of semi-documentary post-war *noir* – tries to retain a quality of it being a historical representation of the 'real world' despite the narrative being a fiction.[103] Ultimately, Hakimi's asserts that games like *LAN*, despite their environment being 'rendered', not 'recorded' like film, can equally 'provide a documentary function as long as it resonates with our cognitive, affective, and phenomenological experience of the historical world'[104] – suggesting that while its historical presentations of the city are not necessarily historical 'truth', they can be remembered as such because of their attention to authentic detail.

Hakimi's argument correlates with Bogost and Klainbaum's assessments of *GTA*'s spatial logic and resonances. But the significant difference is that – unlike *GTA*'s deliberate fictionalisations of world and narrative – *LAN* is *meant* to represent the 'real' Los Angeles. Like calling *RDR* representative of a Western 'reality', there is just as much at risk about assertions that *LAN* (and games which represent historic spaces in general) could serve a documentary function – especially when referring to a 'documentary function' only references the way space has been constructed, *not* historical representations as conveyed through the narrative. It risks glossing over the ways in which gameplay affordances and narrative – while they too claim historical authenticity and basis in fact – elide multiple perspectives on the past. The illusion of a real space can in many

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[101] Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1960), 1.
[102] Jedd Hakimi, 'Playing Los Angeles Itself: Versions of and From the Historical City in *LA Noire* and the "Semi-Documentary Noir', *Wide Screen,* 6.1 (2016), 1-29.
[103] Ibid., 9-10 and 21-22 especially.
[104] Ibid., 27.

ways mask the more problematic, conservative elements of the game which have been communicated within it as though they are similarly historically *accurate*.

Marketing 'Authentic' Detective Work

As with *RDR*, an 'L.A. Noire Gameplay Series' of videos was also featured on Rockstar and IGN's YouTube accounts leading up to *LAN*'s release. The first of these, labelled 'Orientation', literally set the tone by attempting to 'orient'[105] the player as to what to expect from the game. These posts equally sought to ground the game's affordances and setting in both a sense of historical and procedural authenticity, arguing they were founded upon the realities of both post-war Los Angeles and the period's detective work. Yet as usual, both of these types of authenticity discourses were deeply reliant on a history of previous visual media representations.

The videos' non-diegetic voiceover draws attention to the 'meticulous' labour undertaken by Rockstar and Team Bondi to recreate this period and 'explore what it really means to be a detective in Hollywood's Golden Age'.[106] Set over entirely in-game visuals, players are told 'It's 1947. A time before freeways.' References to this Hollywood era are intended to conjure a particular perception of glamour and the sensual perception of historicity, insinuating that this was a 'glamourous city soaked in alcohol, jazz, and corruption.'[107] It feeds into the globalised, cultural memory of what this period of American history was like, through a *noir* lens.

As James Naremore observed, *noir* has become a 'world-wide mass memory.' But moreover, as 'a dream image of bygone glamour, it represses as much history as it recalls, usually in the service of cinephilia and commodification'.[108] As with the promotional discourse surrounding *RDR*, this is not a neutral attempt at faithfully representing historical life and social forces. The world and its historical setting are repeatedly, deliberately encoded as being inherently brutal, violent, and criminal, 'repressing' any historical interpretation to the contrary. The period is repeatedly historicised as 'one of

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[105] The title of the video literally echoes Mittell's designation of paratexts as 'orienting' the viewer, or here player, as well as referring to the induction process of new jobs. See Mittell, *Complex TV*.
[106] 'L.A. Noire Gameplay Series Video: "Orientation"', *YouTube*, uploaded by Rockstar Games, 9 February 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yZ0T_t5j4s&list=PL1AF1F0CC435D69B7& index=10 [accessed 19 June 2018].
[107] Ibid.
[108] Naremore, *More Than Night*, 39.

the most brutal and crime-filled periods in the city's history',[109] and that its heights of glamour were accompanied by a similar prevalence of brutal, criminal violence.[110] We can consider that this offers insight into contemporary perceptions of this period; a willingness or currency to selling this period as somehow dark, criminal, filled with violence and death. Even recent academic histories of this period in Hollywood have fallen prey to exploiting this narrow focus, whereby the experience of Hollywood is read as being inherently 'hardboiled'.[111] Thus as much as these videos attempt to solicit the appearance of historical authenticity, they do so in a way that validates Rockstar's development choices, and ultimately reveals their historical interpretations. These interpretations appear to be in line with, and capitalise on, popular perceptions of post-war America – specifically Hollywood – viewed thorough a *noir* lens.

Within this discourse of historical authenticity are attempts to encode player actions with the sense that they are akin to or representative of a kind of procedural authenticity or 'real detective work'. Players are also told in these promotional videos that Cole Phelps is a 'World War II hero and rookie cop, looking to right the wrongs committed during his time in the war.' Players are told that their actions, and the successful completion of challenges, will lead Phelps 'closer to unveiling the dark heart of the Los Angeles criminal underworld.'[112]

Repeated emphasis is made that the game required a certain kind of player skill which was perhaps atypical for a Rockstar game: 'critical thinking skills are just as important as surviving skirmishes, or chasing criminals'. The video asserted that the player's 'powers of reason and emotional intelligence can make […] or break each case.'[113] This was also perpetuated by game critics, whose judgment echoed the supposed 'cerebral' nature of the gameplay.[114] Furthermore, in addition to a video that introduced players to the gameplay features and mechanics of 'Investigation and Interrogation', a separate video titled 'Rising through the Ranks' overviewed the different LAPD 'desks' that underpinned the game narrative's progression. Familiarising potential players with

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[109] 'L.A. Noire: Gameplay Series Video "Rising through The Ranks"', Rockstar Games, 20 April 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm2PqSuVYU4&list=PL1AF1F0CC435D69B7&index=6 [accessed 19 June 2018].
[110] '"Orientation"'.
[111] See for example Jon Lewis, *Hard-Boiled Hollywood: Crime and Punishment in Postwar Los Angeles* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); See also Richard Lingeman, *The Noir Forties: The American People from Victory to the Cold War* (New York: Nation Books, 2012).
[112] Ibid.
[113] '"Orientation"'; 'L.A. Noire Gameplay Series Video: "Investigation and Interrogation"', *YouTube,* uploaded by Rockstar Games, 9 March 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Afy1l4nbEpc&list=PL1AF1F0CC435D69B7&index=8 [accessed 19 June 2018].
[114] Stuart, '*L.A. Noire*: The Interview'.

the various partners that would accompany them across the Patrol, Traffic, Homicide, Vice and Arson desks, the voiceover emphasised the challenges each desk would pose, the different skills each would require players to demonstrate, and how their experiences there would flesh out the historicism of the game world. That is, the Patrol Desk would require 'initiative' while Phelps/the player proved himself as a beat cop. While investigating Traffic cases, players would 'discover that seemingly simple cases can be darker […] and more complex than they first appear'. Homicide allows players to interact with history itself, via a series of murders connected to the Black Dahlia case, 'one of the most notorious unsolved crimes in history'. Vice allowed players to experience 'the most glamourous department in the LAPD'. Finally, undertaking Arson investigations, the player through Phelps will 'uncover a plot that will shake this city to its rotten core.'[115] The video also explained that a variety of 'Street Crimes' (and their perpetrators) could be pursued while driving around the city between locations, allowing players to respond to 'dispatch' calls on the police radio.

The proscribed nature of this 'story-driven' game type stands in direct contrast to the fact there was an affective, immersive element to Rockstar's promotional claims: that 'based on the choices you make, each case can play out very differently.'[116] Considering these claims in light of the actual gameplay and narrative affordances of *LAN*, they appear to contradict comments made by Rockstar representatives in developer interviews. Developer interviews suggested that the purpose of game was not just about finding 'an "answer"' or resolve, but rather, as Rockstar's Jeronimo Barrera stated in a pre-release interview, '[i]t's about keeping track of the story, the whole performance'.[117] Rather than offering the complete open world, free-roam experience of *RDR* or other Rockstar titles like *GTA*, where players could 'go out and create [their] own gameplay', *LAN* was marketed as more 'story-driven'.[118] Indeed, the fact that players are enabled to skip action sequences (those that can result in the player's death) should suggest that this was not a game oriented around car chases and shootouts in the same way *GTA* was. While they were a feature of the game, they held less intended meaning than the sum of its narrative.

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[115] 'L.A. Noire: Gameplay Series Video "Rising through The Ranks"', *YouTube*, uploaded by Rockstar Games, 20 April 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm2PqSuVYU4&list=PL1AF1F0CC435D69B7&index=6 [accessed 19 June 2018].
[116] '"Investigation and Interrogation"'.
[117] Jeronimo Barrera in Stuart, '*L.A. Noire*: The Interview'.
[118] Jeronimo Barerra in Cowen, '*L.A. Noire* Developer Interview'.

The stated intention was to make a game 'paced like a TV show' that featured occasional 'bursts of action'.[119] In Barrera's words, the game structure is

> based on the tried and true formula of cop shows that have been around for years on television. There's an element people will be familiar with, whether you're a hardcore gamer or not: you show up at a crime scene, you find evidence and then you go talk to suspects.[120]

This promotional rhetoric inherently ascribes what the gameplay affords players as the chance to emulate the kinds of 'detective work' they will be familiar with either through police-procedural and other 'classic' *film noirs* – in their own experience or as 'recommended' by Rockstar elsewhere – but also procedural cop shows on television. Once again echoed here is that the kind of authentic gameplay experience that *LAN* will afford is to do something that had previously only been able to be viewed in visual media. Now, players could *be* the detective, the one asking the questions and investigating the crimes. This authenticity is mediated and drawn from the kind of experience people will have of the televised or cinematic mediation *itself*, not the veiled-in-confidentiality (and history) 'real thing'.

Unsurprisingly then, what is presented on screen from the player's point of view, and the actual things that the game requires players to *do* through Phelps, mimic particular scenes in cinema directly, and notably, the attention to detail paid to objects of investigation is highly visually similar to the way that this has been done in several notable neo-*noirs* which themselves aim to recreate them 'classic' *noir* period. For example, the framing of Gittes's investigation in *Chinatown* (*figure. 9 & 11*), and Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey) in *L.A. Confidential* (*figure. 10*), and the similar view players are given of evidence when investigating cases in *LAN*:

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[119] Ibid.
[120] Stuart, '*LA Noire*: the interview'.

IMAGE REDACTED

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 9. Above: Still from LAN *('The Black Caesar'). Below: still from* Chinatown. *Both show the investigation of objects – here a wallet and driver's license.*

IMAGE REDACTED

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 10. Above: LA Confidential. *Below:* LAN *('The Black Caesar')*

IMAGE REDACTED

IMAGE REDACTED

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 11. Viewing Land Registry ledgers at the County Hall of Records for evidence in LAN *('A Polite Invitation') (above) and* Chinatown *(below).*

Philippa Gates has discussed how the focus on the actual procedural processes of detectives came to install a new sense of realism in the so called 'semi-documentary' style films of the 1940s and the way that, as a result, 'the procedural brought the science of crime to the foreground'. Moreover, Gates argues that while 'unlike the pedantic scenes of Photostats and surveillance that dominated the procedural [films of the 1940s], the technology of investigation in today's criminalist narrative has become a spectacle in itself, from the exposed internal body of autopsies to the ultraviolet exposure of blood at crime scenes'.[121] Much of this can be said for *LAN* too, wherein players are invited to the morgue to view the coroner's autopsy findings, and are required to investigate gory, bloody crime scenes and the exposed mutilated bodies of victims. *LAN*'s gameplay draws on both the visual iconographies and framing of neo-*noirs*, and the way that contemporary procedural television shows afford access to the visceral nature of criminal investigations – not, for example, the official procedure of the Los Angeles police detectives in the 1940s. Indeed, how could this be the case, when the popular perceptions of these techniques are founded on their mediated representations, within a contemporary cultural landscape saturated by 'tabloid forensic science' media products. That is, the period before and around *LAN*'s release coincides what Lindsay Steenberg has classified as contemporary popular culture's 'forensic turn': whereby, through popular television shows like *CSI* (2000-2015) and *Bones* (2005-2017), 'a mediated version of forensic science has embedded itself in American culture's foundational views about truth, criminality, professionalism and victimhood, and the contemporaneous surge in forensic entertainment.'[122] The contemporary (re)mediation of criminal investigations is as much a crucial context for *LAN,* then, as are the 'cop shows' and authentic *noir*s the game's promotion foregrounds.

Yet the fact that the final missions of the game require players to control the character of insurance investigator Jack Kelso – à la *Double Indemnity*'s Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) – suggests an awareness that providing a complete '*noir*' experience is about offering more than just an LAPD-centric narrative. It appears that Rockstar/Team Bondi were aware of the pervasiveness – perhaps greater number, in fact – of private eye narratives, and their cruciality to *noir* genre canon. The male-investigatory narrative does

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[121] Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 91.
[122] Lindsay Steenberg, *Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture: Gender, Crime and Science* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

not solely operate within the confines of official institutions, and therefore to create *LAN* only as a police procedural game would elide a number of these other narrative types.

Moreover, what was also cinematically pervasive at the time in the 1940s and 1950s were investigatory narratives that didn't revolve around the male detective at all. In a number of films that Helen Hanson overviews in her study of women in *noir* and gothic Hollywood films of the Hollywood studio era, she highlights that 'female investigators [...] were actually staple female figures in popular detective fictions and films in the 1940s, particularly B-pictures and series films',[123] yet the inherent connection between 'authentic' *noir* products and the hardboiled literary tradition has led to the diminishing or exclusion of these roles (and their films) from the proper *noir* canon.[124] Moreover, while offering more of a 'woman's angle', and often marketed to female audiences,[125] a specific type of *noir* narrative existed in which

> the working-girl investigators are characterised by their physical activity in the film's urban spaces. They deploy an active investigative gaze, and the editing of the sequences – particularly the use of reaction shots – constructs the action from a female perspective […] These are instances of women driving the narrative in a 'male' genre, and 'male' generic space, and provide a distinctive modification of the *noir* as an exclusively 'male' mode.[126]

By eliding not only female-oriented *noir* fictions from their recommendations, but by removing all possibility for female-action (whether player-controlled or not) in the game, what gets perpetuated is the traditional, canonical view of what *noir* was and is: and that the action was male, and *not* female. This is hardly specific to Rockstar however, and appears to persist in popular, even critical, perceptions of the *noir* form. A recent feature article published on the BFI website adopted a similar tone to 'Rockstar Recommends' in advising readers as to 'where to begin with neo-noir'. Yet the article only made reference to one particular example of a film with a female lead (Joel and Ethan Coen's *Fargo* [1996]), and in doing so emphasised that the film, by featuring a heavily pregnant female detective (Frances McDormand) in the leading role, is 'elegantly flipping genre

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[123] Hanson highlights character types such as 'femme detectives, girl-sleuths, investigating school teachers, reporters and librarians': for example, the popularity of Nancy Drew novels which were picked up and produced as a 'cycle' by Warner Bros from the late 1930s; 'investigating schoolmarm Miss Hildegarde Withers', who was given her own series of films produced by RKO; the 'popular series character' of female reporter Torchy Blane in a number of Warner Bros films; and more. See Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 27–28.
[124] Ibid., 27–28; Citing Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 72.
[125] Ibid., 31–32.
[126] Ibid., 25.

tropes on their heads'. The central 'genre trope' that it is here seemingly atypically subverted is that of 'the hard-drinking, cynical detective protagonist *you'd normally expect to find at the centre of such a tale*'.[127]

Selling Freedom and the Illusion of Choice

The proscribed nature of this 'story-driven' game type based around these kind of heavily-mediated investigation mechanics stands in direct contrast to Rockstar's marketing of affective, immersive elements to *LAN*: that 'based on the choices you make, each case can play out very differently.'[128] These claims directly contradict both the actual gameplay and narrative affordances of *LAN*, and the above statements made by Rockstar representatives in developer interviews. Players can make certain, limited choices about the order in which to collect evidence, visit crime scene locations, interrogate suspects, and responds to those interrogations, which may affect the micro instances and narratives of individual cases. Their choices do also influence the final 'performance ranking' they are awarded at the end of each case. Yet even if the player performs so poorly that their action triggers a cutscene in which they are chastised by their Lieutenant and threatened with desk duty, they are never prevented from progressing through the game and to the next case. The individual choices players make – as authentic or immersive as they are claimed to be – are never allowed to disrupt the continuity of the overarching, linear narrative that Rockstar and Team Bondi had designed.

In a contradictory way, the promotion of both *LAN* – and indeed, *RDR* – sells the idea of freedom and player choice within a 'complete' or 'authentic' historical representation, while the individual actions players take have little bearing on the progression of a predefined story. Muriel and Crawford put forth that 'video games can be seen as devices that, at the same time, enable and condition the player's agency.'[129] A 'paradox', as they define it, therefore exists between giving players the illusion of freedom, while they are controlled by what is 'pre-determined or predestined'[130] – by the game and

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[127] My emphasis. See Paul O'Callaghan, 'Where to Begin with Neo-Noir', *BFI*, 2 February 2016, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/fast-track-fandom-where-begin-neo-noir [accessed 12 September 2017].

[128] "'Investigation and Interrogation'".

[129] Muriel and Crawford, *Video Games As Culture*, 67.

[130] Alec Charles, 'Playing with One's Self: Notions of Subjectivity and Agency in Digital Games', *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3, no. 2 (2009): 286; Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron, in this sense, argue that players can only ever truly react to the finite, controlled scenarios that games offer them, not act of their own, free accord. See Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron, 'In the Frame of the Magic Circle: The Circle(s) of Gameplay', in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron

its developer, or by wider, external forces like promotional and wider paratextual discourses. In this case, on the other hand, the promotional materials market player agency and freedom to enact whatever Western fantasy they can imagine, or that the outcome of investigations are shaped by player actions. Yet even Houser himself explicitly acknowledged that Rockstar, as with all game developers, had tried to negotiate the balance between making players feel as though they have freedom, and pushing them to progress through *RDR*'s story ('You want the player to feel almost torn between "Do I go and do the structured thing or do I go and not do the structured thing?"'),[131] just as Barrera was clear that in *LAN,* there is even less room to go out and make your own story. The actual game experience offers at best a kind of 'directed freedom',[132] wherein players can interact with the game within to achieve certain objectives, but are ultimately rewarded with cutscenes that are in themselves predetermined both in content and message.[133] The player may have some relative freedom or agency to undertake certain tasks, but these are never allowed to undermine or conflict with the game's overarching narrative or pre-programmed message[134] or indeed, historical representation, as it is textually and paratextually positioned. This historical representation is entirely reordered and legitimated insofar as players are expected to want to consume Rockstar's vision of these worlds and their history; and their 'authenticity', 'realism', or 'believability' privileges the experiences of heteronormative white masculinity.

LAN's promotional rhetoric on the one hand suggests that the player's observational skills and intuition determine their skill, and whether or not the player might prove to 'be a good detective'.[135] On the other hand, much like the claim that *RDR* would offer 'the complete Western experience interactively', and a wide variety of 'classic Western situations', [136] *LAN* is presented as the quintessential detective game, offering not only a variety of historically authentic crimes, but a blend of different kinds of

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(London: Routledge, 2009), 109–31; This philosophical 'paradox' has similarly been explored in Tanya Krzywinska, 'Being a Determined Agent in (the) *World of Warcraft*', in *Videogame, Player, Text*, ed. Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 101–19; Rowan Tulloch, 'The Construction of Play: Rules, Restriction, and the Repressive Hypothesis', *Games and Culture* 9, no. 5 (2014): 335–50; Víctor Navarro-Remesal and Shalia García-Catalán, 'Let's Play Master and Slave: BDSM and Directed Freedom in Game Design', in *Rated M for Mature*, ed. M. Wysocki and E. W. Lauteria (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 119–32.

131 Houser quoted in Onyett, 'Into the Wild West'.

132 Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán, 'Let's Play Master and Slave'.

133 Robert Alan Brookey and Paul Booth, 'Restricted Play: Synergy and the Limits of Interactivity in The *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* Video Game', *Games and Culture* 1, no. 3 (2006): 218.

134 This is similarly explored by Muriel and Crawford, in relation to the Foucauldian notion of the *dispositif*. See Muriel and Crawford, *Video Games As Culture*, 80.

135 "'Investigation and Interrogation'".

136 Ted Carson in Gamespot Staff, '*Red Dead Redemption*'.

interactive 'police work'. But while great pains are taken within this promotional discourse to ground gameplay affordances in both historical and procedural authenticity, what 'police work' consists of is largely draw from cinematic and televisual procedural representations, such as those featured in 'Rockstar Recommends' or in the broader contemporary media. Ultimately, these gameplay affordances, coded as authentic, allow players to navigate and progress through the 'story-based' game designed by Rockstar and Team Bondi, with little self-direction available to them – other than the illusion of freedom and choice.

These three strands of promotional rhetoric – historical, procedural, and cinematic or wider cultural authenticity – converge in an official trailer uploaded to Rockstar's YouTube account that included 'annotations'.[137] The annotations make reference to historical details or events featuring 'real' historical people, making direct visual reference to the in-game instances that they are based on (*figure. 12*). They denote specific actors and gesture their well-known film or television roles (*figure. 13*), sometimes in the same frame as these historical details (*figure. 14*). They also offer details about gameplay, like other 'gameplay videos' (*figure. 15*), and *LAN*'s wider narrative (*figure. 16*).

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 12. 'L.A. Noire Trailer 3: Official Annotated Version' (0.09minutes).

[137] 'L.A. Noire Trailer 3: Official Annotated Version', *YouTube*, uploaded by Rockstar Games, 18 April 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdLxe_HrSNI&list=PL1AF1F0CC435D69B7&index=5 [accessed 19 June 2018].

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 13. 'L.A. Noire Trailer 3: Official Annotated Version' (0.18minutes).

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 14. 'L.A. Noire Trailer 3: Official Annotated Version' (0.45minutes).

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 15. 'L.A. Noire Trailer 3: Official Annotated Version' (1.05minutes).

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 16. 'L.A. Noire Trailer 3: Official Annotated Version' (0.35minutes).

They situate the game's narrative within a wider network of cultural texts, as well as a wider network of historical events; serving literally as 'digressions' intended to summon to players' minds different historical or cultural intertexts.[138]

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that promotional materials and the paratextual discourses they generate are sites at which a developer-historian can sell their labour in creating vast, historically authentic worlds, but also attempt to sell a certain kind of gameplay experience. Despite claiming to offer something 'complete' and 'immersive', even unique, gameplay videos appear to feature only those aspects that they believe players will be most attracted to, or desire. From these materials we can distinguish between the richly detailed and complex historical worlds that are created by developers – which contain some nuance, some variation from this dominant – and what Rockstar here uses to market the game. Working as one of a number of possible 'thresholds' to the texts, as in Genette's original conception of the paratext, that media scholars have much-utilised since, they welcome in one audience while perhaps pushing away another.[139] As with their 'recommendations', or attempts to create historicity by narrativising the 'True West' or 'real crimes' of the past, these paratextual materials 'focus on certain aspects of a text, ignoring others completely, in ways that may recalibrate how we are invited to make sense of that text.'[140] They invite in players to whom a Rockstar-authored vision of American history appeals, or induct and educate potential players not already familiar with the brand – perhaps conveying that these games are not for them.

By creating meaning, and early historical meaning at that, Rockstar generates expectations about what these games mean, where the character (and necessarily the player) is positioned within them. They attempt to situate potential players within an historical narrative of Rockstar's own making – textually and paratextually – by telling them what to expect, and what not to. The paratexts become the site for the performance of a kind of symbiotic authenticity, that the rendering of virtual space is authentic – or rather, promoted as such by developer-historian(s) – and therefore the ludic/narrative affordances of the game (that which is contained within it) must be too.

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138 Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema'.
139 See Gray, 'The Politics of Paratextual Ephemeralia', 33.
140 Ibid., 34.

Just as Rockstar (and Team Bondi) try and textually control (or at least guide) the player's movement through these game worlds, Rockstar paratextually attempt to control the perception of what these historic game worlds were 'really' like. In both, there is little space for the representation of anything domestic or non-criminal – nothing representative of the multiplicities of life in 1947 Los Angeles beyond the experience of the white-male detective, or of the Southwestern frontier at the turn of the century, despite the prevalence of cinematic or wider cultural representations of this nature. The inspirations for the gameplay affordances of *LAN* and *RDR* are once again shown to be dictated by the selections of Rockstar, dictated by their personal tastes and brand identity, around which they paratextually curate a vision of these historic periods and cinematic movements.

It is a choice to continue to represent a very specific makeup of society as the fulcrum of player agency in games. Likewise, it is a choice to repeatedly tell historicised stories about the same kinds of protagonists, who serve as vessels filled with the substance of tropes canonised elsewhere in the media. Give players the 'Rockstar Games Presents' version of history, supported and authenticated paratextually, and it is a monolithic representation. There is little way to substantively interact with it in a way that it opposes the marginalisation or hegemonic historical representation it offers. That is, limitations placed on players 'do not always allow for the kinds of changes that could be equated with ideological resistance,'[141] and Rockstar's titles especially fit this assessment. By considering their paratexts as a way of inducting potential players into the kind of historical representation their games aspire to encapsulate, this potential for resistance is at the very least stunted.

Ultimately, the richness of visual detail contained within these 'realist' simulations, and historicisation of gameplay options, masks the more insidious, marginalising processes beneath the promotional hype and rhetoric. We can therefore use this as a foundation from which to begin dissecting the way that non-white male *others* are treated in both textual and paratextual discourses.

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[141] Brookey and Booth, 'Restricted Play', 118.

Chapter 5: Women in Rockstar's History

'Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.'
– Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.[1]

'In many ways my wife is kind of like you, Miss MacFarlane. She's always been a woman in a man's world.'
– John Marston.[2]

'It's a sad story but this town has seen it play out a thousand times, Cole.'
– Rusty Galloway.[3]

Drawing together many of the themes and issues explored so far, this final chapter considers the way women feature in both the promotion of *RDR* and *LAN*, and the textual construction of an historical narrative and associated gameplay options required to progress it. It explores how performative promotional materials attempted to create a discourse of historical authenticity around the games' historical representations of women, and how this discourse either conflicts with or supports their textual inclusion.

As noted, paratexts for historical media products often attempt to '[stake] a claim' for the historical 'truth' or representativeness of a products construction of the past. The relationship between paratext and text requires consideration 'in order for us to excavate the strata of meaning that can accumulate around' a visual media text before it is itself accessed.[4] Many media texts contain opposing ideologies in order to appeal to the broadest possible audience, or attempt to suggest certain values which are otherwise 'undercut by other aspects of the text.'[5] Paratexts might serve to 'undercut' meaning as much as opposing textual components, and thus promotional media of all kinds can serve as site for the 'authoring' and 're-authoring' of a media text – and its politics.[6] They can also suggest 'normative, "correct", and preferred' interpretations of texts, while

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[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage Books, 1997), 175.
[2] Line of dialogue spoken by John Marston in *RDR* mission 'Wild Horses, Tamed Passions'.
[3] Line of dialogue spoken by Rusty Galloway in *LAN* mission 'The Silk Stocking Murder'.
[4] Ramsay, 'Flagging up History: The Past as a DVD Bonus Feature', 58.
[5] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Post-Modern* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 93.
[6] Gray, 'The Politics of Paratextual Ephemeralia', 34–38.

'abnormalizing and problematizing others.'[7] When those who create paratexts can be viewed as 'textual authors', able to influence the reception of meaning, this kind of authorship is 'authority', dictating 'who has the ability and the right to speak for the text, and who gets to speak with the text.'[8] It is therefore worth continuing to explore who it is that speaks publicly on behalf of Rockstar's American history, and *who* and *what* they choose to speak about – especially when there is an explicitly gendered dimension to the company's promotional discourse.

The promotional materials considered in this chapter are generated by Rockstar, their creative staff, or those involved with the development process, or feature Rockstar representatives in promotional situations performing the role of developer-historian. The same ambiguous politics are present in these varying paratexts, appearing to at times claim the authenticity of, or other times contradict, the game's historical representations. The representation of women in Rockstar's historical titles is a particularly potent case study because not only is it frequently a source of derision in the media and academic criticism, but also because discourses on women are the *only* other demographic aside from white men whose role in past society is addressed in paratexts created to authenticate the games. In doing so, women are ultimately coded as *others* in environments that are otherwise presented as normatively male-dominated.

This is, however, nothing new for the games industry. Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work of feminist theory, *The Second Sex* (1949), is used by Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin and Maude Bonenfant to explore the ways in which women are often portrayed in games as aberrations or alternatives to the otherwise-male norm or default.[9] This is especially pronounced in games where female characters (often those that players can control), are feminised 'variations' on their male counterparts.[10] Relatedly, in 1991 Katha Pollitt proposed the concept of the 'Smurfette Principle' in popular culture more broadly:

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[7] Using the example of *Mad Men*, Jonathan Gray explores the way that the network of paratexts that surrounded the U.S. television show – magazine features, adverts, or interviews with the creator Matthew Weiner – work to either undercut or reaffirm the show's generally-perceived critical stance on nostalgia for mid-twentieth century America, and its occasional feminist commentary on women's position within it. Paratexts created by agents both within the show's creative team and HBO, and outside in the wider media, as well as by fans, can all potentially 'author' and/or 'reauthor' texts. See Ibid., 34–38.

[8] Ibid., 34–35.

[9] Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin and Maude Bonenfant, 'Bridging Games Studies and Feminist Theories', *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* Special Issue: Gender Issues in Video Games (July 2017): 26.

[10] As in classic game franchises like Ms. Pacman/Pacman, Dixie Kong/Donkey Kong, Amy Rose/Sonic the Hedgehog, and so on, or more recent titles such as the *Mass Effect* series. Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant, 26–29; See also Anita Sarkeesian, 'Ms. Male Character –Tropes vs Women', *FeministFrequency*, 18 November 2013, https://feministfrequency.com/video/ms-male-character-tropes-vs-women/ [accessed 1 October 2016].

'The message is clear. Boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral; boys are individuals, girls types. Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys.'[11] The notion of women being non-normative, as long expressed through feminist theory – and indeed, feminist game studies[12] – is relevant to engage with the way *RDR* and *LAN* historicise female characters. While promotional discourses stake a claim for the authenticity of Rockstar's engagement with the past, textual examination reveals that women's roles conform to longstanding marginalisation or stereotyping present in wider cultural representations and historiography. As such, women are positioned as individual elements in overwhelmingly masculine environments – only existing insofar as they can, within the context of a Rockstar-branded story that affords them limited parameters for doing so. In an apt reflection of the quotation from de Beauvoir at the beginning of this chapter, the 'absolute truth' of these exclusionary positions are maintained by exclusively white-male executives in paratexts, offering little room to reflect on the nuances or complexities of history where it does not apply to dominant narratives revolving around and created by men.

Revolver to *Redemption*

The marketing of *RDR* sought to set it apart from its franchise predecessor, *Red Dead Revolver*. In doing so, the way that Rockstar's vision of 'the West' had crystallised around white masculinity was laid bare. In his interview with *IGN*, Dan Houser discussed the relationship between the two games, suggesting that despite their franchise associations they were fundamentally different offerings:

> I think the way we came to see [*Revolver*] as being about the kind of myths and iconic images of the Old West, the cowboy with the scar on his face, the Indian, or the iconic set pieces put together in a somewhat linking story but it was really about trying to show off these very iconic myths about the Old West. Then

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[11] Katha Pollitt, 'Hers; The Smurfette Principle', *The New York Times*, 7 April 1991, http://www.nytimes.com/1991/04/07/magazine/hers-the-smurfette-principle.html [accessed 1 October 2016]. See also Anita Sarkeesian, '#3 The Smurfette Principle (Tropes vs. Women)', *FeministFrequency*, 21 April 2011, https://feministfrequency.com/video/tropes-vs-women-3-the-smurfette-principle/ [accessed 1 October 2016].

[12] For example, Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*; Adrienne Shaw, 'Diversity Without Defence: Reframing Arguments for Diversity in Games', *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* Special Issue: Gender Issues in Video Games (July 2017): 54–76; Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Shira Chess, Nathaniel J. Evans, and Joyya JaDawn Baines, 'What Does a Gamer Look Like? Video Games, Advertising, and Diversity', *Television & New Media* 18, no. 1 (January 2017): 37–57; Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, 'A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying about GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 10, no. 3 (2015): 208–20; Lien, 'No Girls Allowed'.

> what we wanted to do with [*RDR*] was to do something that felt more like the reality of the Old West…Story-wise we felt there was no point linking them because it wouldn't make any sense.[13]

Initially an IP acquired when Rockstar purchased Angel Studios in 2002 (now Rockstar San Diego), *Revolver* was a relatively successful product for the company, by Houser's own admission.[14] Yet while Rockstar 'wound up polishing and completing the project', it was not a game that had what Houser referred to as a 'Rockstar design': it didn't 'play like a Rockstar game.'[15] While taking with them a number of gameplay elements developed in *Revolver* – most notably the Dead Eye weapon mechanic so fundamental to *RDR* and other Rockstar titles[16] – readers were told that the new instalment of the franchise was to be more of the sort of game that Rockstar 'really like to make.'[17]

Aside from being promotional rhetoric suggesting Rockstar were, of course, out to better themselves and make a more exciting open world product, there are a number of allusions made in this interview that may operate as subtle indications of Rockstar's stance in both creating games, and creating historical narratives – allowing us to clarify ambiguities in the politics of their representation. Firstly, we again see the inextricable importance of the Rockstar brand and of having their games feel like an authentic Rockstar-curated experience. Fans are instructed that *RDR* better-resembles Rockstar's developments in open world and free roam simulation through available technology, building on what they were known for with *GTA*. Indeed, this is what much of the rest of the space in the interview is dedicated to: emphasising Rockstar's labour in creating something that would satisfy and live up to this brand identity. More particularly, Houser's comments on the games' respective representation of the 'myth' and 'reality of the Old West' are worth unpicking. Both games were promoted by the use of a similar phrase – the claim that 'this is the Wild West' – in different paratexts.[18] But by the time

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[13] Dan Houser quoted in Onyett, '*Red Dead Redemption*: A Man and His Horse'.

[14] This is supported by information available in Take-Two's Annual Reports. In 2004 the report claimed that *Red Dead Revolver* was one of their top titles. It accounted for 2.4% of Take-Two's sales: sixth out of the top ten titles of 2004 (the top three were *GTA* titles, and the fourth and fifth were *Manhunt* and *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne*). See Take-Two Interactive Software Inc, 'Annual Report 2004', http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-reportsannual [accessed 27 August 2018].

[15] Onyett, 'A Man and His Horse'.

[16] Dead Eye allows players to slow in-game time, enabling them to target enemies (and their body parts) with greater precision. It is a feature of other Rockstar titles such as *Max Payne 3* and *GTAV*, and is likened to the 'bullet time' effect popularised by *The Matrix* trilogy. See Wright, 'Marketing Authenticity', 139.

[17] Onyett, 'A Man and His Horse'.

[18] One of the first gameplay trailers for *RDR* ended with the voiceover proclaiming 'This is what life in the west was like. This is *Red Dead Redemption.*' See 'Gameplay Series: Life in the West: Part I'. Conversely *Revolver*'s narrative, and the backstory of its principle protagonist Red Harlow, is briefly described on the game's main website: 'The calm of the frontier [*sic*] was shattered and a young man's innocence was lost

RDR was released in 2010, it seems as though Rockstar had perfected, and substantially changed, what they would claim was *really* 'the Wild West'. What makes the story of the former so *mythic*, and the latter, by comparison, so *real*?

A PlayStation2/Xbox arcade game set in a series of 'Western' environments (dusty Frontier towns and outposts, ranches, canyons) *Revolver*'s linear structure requires players to progress through levels by eliminating waves of enemies – usually bandits of various shapes, sizes and ethnicities, before defeating a 'boss'/bounty target at the end of each level. It is apparent that the game is heavily inspired by the Spaghetti Western's deconstructionist aesthetics and tone. Reconstructing Western tropes and conventions like duels and shootouts around gameplay sequences, there is little possibility for free-roaming the landscape (aside from upgrading weapons in stores in the town of Brimstone), and it has a comparatively less 'serious' tone, as reviewers observed.[19] Its musical score is drawn entirely from Italian Westerns,[20] and players have unsurprisingly drawn comparisons between Clint Eastwood's Spaghetti Western-influenced characters and Red Harlow, as recorded on the *Red Dead Wiki*.[21]

Though a loose narrative generally follows Red's pursuit of the man who killed his parents, he is not the sole playable-protagonist. Red's narrative is punctuated by gameplay sequences in which the player controls other characters: Jack Swift, an English sharpshooter; Annie Stoakes, a female rancher; Shadow Wolf, a Native American relative of Red[22]; and Buffalo Soldier, a Black American former-slave and Union soldier. It also incorporates other characters — Native-, Mexican-, and Anglo-American (predominantly male but also some female[23]) characters on both sides of the law — which are woven into the gameplay at various points. Thus, despite arguably also being something of a '*realist-*

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when he witnessed the brutal murder of his family. Years have passed but the forged memory and the need for reckoning have not. Now a bounty hunter, you must journey to uncover the truth and to reap vengeance on those responsible. You are Red…and this is the Wild West.' See 'Main', *Red Dead Revolver,* http://www.rockstargames com/reddeadrevolver/index2.htm [accessed 21 July 2016].

[19] Charles Onyett of *IGN* commented that, in comparison to *Redemption*, it was a 'humorous look at a Western-themed game'. Onyett, 'A Man and His Horse'.

[20] The soundtrack features Ennio Morricone, Bruno Nicolai, Francesco de Masi, and taking an instrumental version of Luis Bacalov's title song for *His Name Was King* (1971) as its main theme. Full details for *Revolver's* soundtrack are listed in a dedicated article on the Red Dead Wiki, as well as all of the individual Spaghetti Westerns which individual tracks are taken from. See article 'Red Dead Revolver Soundtrack', subsection 'track listing', *Red Dead Wiki,* http://reddead.wikia.com/wiki/Red_Dead_Revolver_Soundtrack [accessed 14 May 2016].

[21] See article 'Red Harlow', subsection 'Trivia', *Red Dead Wiki,* http://reddead.wikia.com/wiki/Red_Harlow [accessed 14 May 2016]. This reference has been echoed by the specific *Wikipedia* page for 'The Man With No Name' and the characters many incarnations, citing *Revolver* in a subsection denoting texts where the archetype has been mimicked. See 'Man with No Name', subsection 'Other Cultural References', *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man_with_No_Name [accessed 14 May 2016].

[22] Red's father is depicted as white American, and his mother as Native American.

[23] For example, one of the main level bosses is a female gang leader named 'Bad Bessie'.

reconstructionist' simulation[24] – albeit rudimentary by comparison – it affords much more variety in what it represents about the past than *RDR*: at least, in terms of offering multiple perspectives, and therefore a variety of actors with agency in 'the West'. It is crucial to note here that Rockstar's decision to create (and then sell) something that felt 'like a Rockstar game' necessitated removing the possibility for multiple playable-protagonists, resulting in a game that is, as noted in the previous chapter, entirely-ordered around the white-male perspective of John Marston.[25]

While Houser claimed then that *RDR* offered a more serious look at what the West was really like – something more authentic to the inherent, supposed brutality of the period and place, as discussed in chapter four – to make a 'Rockstar game' seemingly necessitated creating some myths of their own, or rather, upholding the long-held mythologising of 'the West' as a white-male-defined environment; a space in which only white men could have any agency or purpose, exercise power fantasies, and claim mastery over the land and its people.[26]

Women in *RDR's* 'True West'

Other paratexts circulated before *RDR*'s release attempted to more explicitly 'author' its representation of the past as historically authentic, and moreover, that it sought to leave behind certain Western 'myths'; especially the deeply-intrenched stereotypes about women in 'the West.' The *Newswire*'s 'True West' series dedicated one of three posts on 'Bad Guys Gone Good…and Vice Versa' to Pearl Hart, who is styled as a 'good girl gone bad', having fallen into a life of crime from respectable upbringings.[27] Hart was styled as a 'bandit queen', a popular figure in pulp literature, as well as later in life the orchestrator of her own show about her criminal activities, an avid fan of female sharpshooter Annie

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[24] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

[25] Moreover, it suggests a possible reason for the lack of Italian Western films featured in the 'Rockstar Recommends' series (as observed in chapter three): that even though *RDR* borrows many of these stylistic elements, their aesthetic, 'tone', and aural characteristics were inherently bound up with *Revolver*.

[26] As noted above, this mythologising reached its apex in Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*; It is also key to the work of Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western*, 3–4; Lee Clark Mitchell, 'Violence in Film Westerns', in *Violence in American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 176–91; John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1970); Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press\, 2012); Even authors like Jane Tompkins fall prey to reading the western in all male terms, despite the attempt to expose this tendency. See Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[27] "Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part Two: Pearl Hart'.

Oakley, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West show.[28] While another 'historical insight' supposed to illustrate the brutalising effect of Western life on its inhabitants, Hart is used as an example to convey that, in Rockstar's view, the image of women in the Western cultural canon is far more simplified than existed in real life:

> The two dominant Western female archetypes that have emerged from popular literature and film – are the innocent and prim townswoman, versus the tawdry saloon whore. Of course in the real Old West, historical female figures weren't nearly so simplistic to characterize. In [*RDR*], you'll meet a couple of complex and conflicted women such as Bonnie - a smart and strong-willed rancher's daughter known to be more than capable with a gun, and Luisa - a driven young Mexican girl doing what she has to to help her family.[29]

Supported by in-game captures of characters like Bonnie MacFarlane, set against 'real' photographs of Hart's mugshot and time in prison in Arizona, here is a suggestion that within the 'reality of the Old West' Rockstar hoped to recreate, they would attempt to remedy these calcified binary stereotypes of Western women. The post discusses the ambiguous details of her life and the little that is known about her: 'Who was this woman of many faces? A soiled dove corrupted by her outlaw lovers and their wild lifestyle... a cigar-chomping deadbeat mom robbing on the run for fun… or a proto-feminist icon and early contributor to Cosmo?'[30] The post ultimately suggests that, in taking so much care to recount the details of her life story, *RDR* (and by extension perhaps, Rockstar's) intentions are purposefully feminist, and that the game will work to remedy the stereotypical portrayal of women in Western fictions in a manner familiar to New Western History.

Yet the message of other paratexts appears to diminish what might be perceived as a bold claim about the game's representational aspirations. In the same aforementioned *IGN* interview, Houser's comments on the intended 'tone' of the game diminishes the 'realism' of female-authored Western source material, while giving authority to male-authored Western fiction:

> We didn't want it to feel like those old Saturday afternoon TV shows, matinee movie Westerns where people kind of get shot and crumble and die very quickly, very carefully off-camera. In

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[28] Little academic work exists on Hart, but stories about her life are featured on certain websites dedicated to prominent Western figures. For example, Kathy Weiser, 'Pearl Hart – Lady Bandit of Arizona', *Legends of America,* last updated September 2017, https://www.legendsofamerica.com/we-pearlhart/ [accessed 21 August 2018]; Magda Origjanska, 'Female Bandit Pearl Hart: "I shall not be tried under a law in which my sex had no voice in making', *The Vintage News*, 18 December 2017, https://www.thevintagenews.com/2017/12/18/female-bandit-pearl-hart/ [accessed 21 August 2018].
[29] 'Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part Two: Pearl Hart'.
[30] 'Bad Guys Gone Good...And Vice Versa - Part Two: Pearl Hart'.

> reading books like Blood Meridian, when it depicts the *real* horror of the West, I think we wanted to get an element of that in there. We didn't want it to feel like Little House on the Prairie […] We thought it was vital for it to *properly depict these kind of characters and this kind of world*, the violence had to feel slightly raw and unpleasant.[31]

While *Little House on the Prairie* (NBC, 1974-1983) is perhaps a coincidental, sufficiently famous example Houser chose to draw upon – calling to mind family-friendly Westerns which were apparently lighter in tone – its mention results in the explicit lessening of a particular kind of Western cultural product. Indeed, the series written by and based on the life experiences of female Westerner Laura Ingalls Wilder, did explore the experiences of women and their families. But the popular view of them as merely children's literature is reductive and overlooks the ways they documented harsh American realities. Her books showed that life in America's West was hard, and in many ways also dark for white-American colonists, and they continue to be appreciated by readers of all ages.[32] Thus while Ingalls Wilder's work has hardly been held up as a paragon of inclusivity and displayed pejorative attitudes toward Native Americas,[33] it offered a different perspective on Western life – and a comparatively more female-inclusive picture of life in 'the West'. Yet seemingly this did not have the right 'tone' to be considered a valid reference point for the game; or most especially, it did not legitimise the picture of Western life Rockstar had endeavoured to paint. Privileged is male-authored source material that it is claimed 'properly' depicts 'real' Western life in all its brutal glory.

The study of Western American literature was itself maligned until the 1960s, and consideration of women's work in the form has therefore been a 'margin of a marginal field'; further compounded by the work of frontier historians such as Slotkin, who emphasised violence and conquest,[34] setting 'critical paradigms' that excluded women's voices.[35] Moreover, influential assertions by scholars like Tompkins in *West of Everything*

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[31] My emphasis. Dan Houser quoted in Onyett, 'Into the Wild West'.

[32] 'Laura Ingalls' America', *Sunday Feature* (BBC Radio 3, 10 December 2017), https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09hrr7n?ns_mchannel=social&ns_campaign=bbc_radio_3&ns_source=twitter&ns_linkname=radio_and_music [accessed 22 October 2018].

[33] See Debbie Reese, 'Renaming the Laura Ingalls Wilder award isn't disturbing, William Shatner – it's necessary', *The Guardian,* 10 July 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/10/renaming-the-laura-ingalls-wilder-award-isnt-disturbing-william-shatner-its-necessary [accessed 12 July 2018]; Charlotte Eyre, 'Laura Ingalls Wilder Award renamed after racism concerns', *The Bookseller*, 28 June 2018, https://www.thebookseller.com/news/us-association-renames-laura-ingalls-wilder-award-818771 [accessed 12 July 2018].

[34] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation.*

[35] Victoria Lamont, 'Big Books Wanted: Women and Western American Literature in the Twenty-First Century', *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 31, no. 2 (2014): 311–12.

that 'the Western was conceived as a male-authored backlash against women's sentimental culture' has perpetuated critical perceptions (and studies) of the otherness of women's writings, and not the themes or traits they may share with male-authored Western literature.[36] Lacking 'big books' of sustained scholarly attention that might account for the diversity of Western women's work, it has proved difficult to disrupt hegemonic literary-critical paradigms, and indeed, historiography of 'the West' and its culture.[37]

There *were* female-authored works that explored the brutality and violence of western life,[38] yet only the work of male writers is held up as exemplary. As noted above, McCarthy is featured in Rockstar's 'recommendations', where the description defines it as a work that 'chronicles the darkest, most brutal side of the American West', offering 'a completely terrifying look at how America was really built.'[39] McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* shares a thematic interconnection with another of Rockstar's core cited influences: for example, Sam Peckinpah and his recoding of Western space as inherently violent, masculine, and brutal. As Susan Kollin writes, McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* aligns closely with Peckinpah's 'vision' of the West(ern), in that 'its treatment of violence is in no way restrained or confined, but anarchic and pushed to the extreme.' Despite the fact that his work can be read as taking a generally nihilistic view of the West in general, some critics argue that McCarthy's use of Western codes and conventions, even if attempting to subvert them, 'threatens to reinstate the gendered and mythic violence of the region.'[40]A similar claim is often made that Peckinpah thought little of humanity in general, which is used to excuse his misogynistic treatment of women, who are routinely brutalised in his films: that this is a 'democratic' treatment applied to his male characters as well.[41] But Kitses counters this by noting that such opinions 'hardly [address] the imbalance of the typical Peckinpah narrative's emphasis and action; with its heroic structure of deep respect and intimacy between men.' That is, Peckinpah's 'greatest flaw' was his representation of women, unsurprising '[g]iven his obsessed focus on an unbalanced

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[36] Ibid, 316; Citing Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 47–68.
[37] Christine Bold, '"The Frontier Story": The Violence of Literary History', in *A Companion to American Fiction, 1865-1914*, ed. Robert P. Lamb and G. R. Thompson (New York: Blackwell, 2005), 201–21; Lamont, 'Big Books Wanted'.
[38] For example, Mari Sandoz's non-fiction books about pioneer life, such as *Old Jules* (1935).
[39] 'Rockstar Recommends: The Best of the Rest of the West'.
[40] Kollin, 'Genre and the Geographies of Violence', 563.
[41] As argued by Bill Mesce, *Peckinpah's Women: A Reappraisal of the Portrayal of Women in the Period Westerns of Sam Peckinpah* (Landam, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001). Cited in Kitses, *Horizons West*, 203; See also Seydor, *Peckinpah*, xx.

manhood defined through bloodshed and alienated from a meaningful social role.'[42] In Peckinpah's films 'women and the family are marginalised and often victimised', and the 'woman as whore' was the filmmaker's 'ideal'.[43] Indeed, it is largely unsurprising that Paul Seydor entitles a chapter on *The Wild Bunch* in his reappraisal of Peckinpah's films 'Men without Women'.[44] The consequences of these cultural foundations, and their impact on *RDR*'s textual representation of women, are profound.

'A man's world'

For all Rockstar's claims that they wanted to move away from binary stereotypes, *RDR* includes two binary categories of its own: women who are either 'major' or 'minor' characters.[45] This examination is largely concerned with the three 'major' female characters who appear in the compulsory main storyline missions of the game: Bonnie MacFarlane, who occupies a significant guiding function for players to learn game controls in the first act of the game; Luisa Fortuna, a young Mexican revolutionary; and Abigail Marston, John's wife, who appears for the first time in the third act of the game, though is referred to frequently by various characters prior to that point. Tellingly, they appear in only three of the four acts of the game narrative, and in only one of the missions they feature in – as gameplay and narrative device – do they have any contact with each other. Moreover, even during their sole interaction and possibility of passing the Bechdel Test,[46] the game utterly fails. While these women are more developed and narratively significant than the minor female characters of *RDR*, the game still struggles to negotiate between two representations of women throughout its narrative: women as apparently superior or equal to men in worth, and women as figures whose power can be undermined substantially by abuse – verbal or physical, implied or actual – of them sexually. This is compounded by the fact that *all* of the game's women (major or minor) are defined in opposition to men in some way, epitomising the fact that all of these

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[42] Kitses, *Horizons West*, 203.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Seydor, *Peckinpah*, xxiv.
[45] Not designated as such by Rockstar, have been branded thus fans on the *Red Dead Wiki*, as paratextual source of fan-accumulated game information, best practice, and advice.
[46] Alison Bechdel's term, coined in 1985, set the following (bare minimum) conditions for determining whether women were represented fairly in films (and by extension, other media): '1: It must have at least two female characters, 2: They must both have names, and 3: They must talk to each other about something other than a man'. *RDR*, in this respect, fails on the third count. See 'About', *The Bechdel Test*, http://bechdeltestfest.com/about/ [accessed 1 February 2019].

characters are 'usually designed by men and perform the role of a male's sweetheart or mother-of-his-child instead of having an identity and life of their own.'[47]

While *RDR*'s major female characters are not necessarily feminised versions of Marston or other male characters, as in the examples Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant cite, de Beauvoir's theories are still relevant insofar as these female characters are presented as the points of difference in a world that is not for them; women (variations) in 'a man's world', the norm. As per de Beauvoir, then, the male is an 'absolute human type', and femininity is other; a man can '[think] of his body as a direct and normal connection to the world', and humanity (and the human world, thereof) is intrinsically male.[48] In this case, it is Western space that is inherently hospitable to the masculine.

As noted, ignoring women's role in the West and on the Frontier is hardly unique to Rockstar however, nor is it merely a trope of the Western genre and its criticism. This trend can be traced back as far as to Frederick Jackson Turner, whose legacy as a historiographer of the West is profound.[49] In addition to the overtly white-supremacist tone of his Thesis, Turner largely 'characterized America's expansionist phase as a male phenomenon'.[50] By 'overlooking the ladies', as Glenda Riley puts it, Turner ultimately 'helped create a tunnel vision that his followers perpetuated in the area of study he loved – sectionalism and the American West. Instead of enlarging Turner's viewpoint to include such groups as women, they supported and repeated Turner's primary arguments'.[51] Thus,

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[47] Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant, 'Bridging Games Studies and Feminist Theories', 27; Citing Sarkeesian, 'Ms. Male Character –Tropes vs Women'. All of the 'minor' female characters are defined in some way in relation to male characters, and usually only appear in non-compulsory 'Stranger' missions. Clara LaGuerta, the principal character in a stranger mission entitled 'The Wronged Woman', has been cast out of Blackwater after becoming pregnant with her master's child, and the player must ask the man for money on her behalf; Jenny Hamilton, the young woman who accompanies the Preacher on the train from Blackwater to Armadillo in the opening sequence, who in the stranger mission 'Jenny's Faith' is found by the player dehydrated and sick, hallucinating in the wilderness waiting for visions from God; And in the stranger mission 'Let No Man Put Asunder', Alma Horlick, an old woman in a wedding dress in the middle of the wilderness who asks John to find her groom (a man who has been dead for 17 years), and Rose Harling, the scorned wife of a cheating husband that the player can either bribe the man to leave alone, or hogtie and return to him against her will, so the man will help in tracking down Alma's husband. These minor, isolated female characters mostly serve little purpose, other than in these select, enclosed narratives which largely revolve around these female characters' relationship to male characters.

[48] de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 15–16.

[49] William Cronon, 'Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner', *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1987): 157–76.

[50] Glenda Riley, 'Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies', *Journal of the Early Republic* 12, no. 2 (1993): 216; Ironically, though maligned by Dan Houser, works like *Little House on the Prairie* offered a gendered binary opposite to the male-exclusivity of Turner's conceptions of 'the Frontier'. See John E Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), especially 94-109.

[51] Riley, 'Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies', 217 Arguably, this sort of exclusionary scholarship continues: in texts on the general history of the U.S., women's experiences in Westward Expansion are sparse. For example, the several-editions reprinted *America: A Narrative History* recognises that Turner ignored women's contributions to the settlement of the West, and yet confines women's

though many of his followers considered the effects of what they believed to be 'the West' on the American psyche, '[n]one of these Turnerian commentators considered the effects of wilderness and space on women.'[52] Turner's exclusivity had consequences beyond the historical profession: 'Long bereft of guidance from historians […] shapers of popular culture supplied interpretations that fell into two types: images based upon traditional beliefs regarding American women and those derived from more modern conceptions of women.'[53] Mythologised images and stereotypes – binaries like the whore and virgin, for example – were created and perpetuated as a stopgap for a generalised lack of established female representations.

Until recently, even the presence of women in Westerns has largely been overwritten in histories of cinema. Indeed, scholars like J.E. Smyth, Helen Hanson, and Hillary Hallett in particular have studied the prominence of women in the creation and development of Hollywood, and ultimately, the American film industry, from both sides of the camera.[54] Ultimately, however, certain factors have led to an historical 'erasure' of the importance of women in this area, despite trends in the industry during the early twentieth century in which the industry became centred around and aimed at a female audience.[55]

As previously noted, since Turner's time individuals or successive waves of historians have sought to populate this reductively white-male picture with those historically marginalised: women, Native Americans, and other people of colour. As de Beauvoir conceived that it was the absolute that defined the *other*, it is largely male scholars who have historically positioned 'the West' – like the rest of the world – as a male space. For Rockstar, it is Marston, the (male) character whose totalising story and experiences players follow through the game world, who positions Bonnie and Abigail specifically as other, to himself and all other men within *RDR*'s world.

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experiences to merely a paragraph, reinforcing that 'The West remained a largely male society throughout the nineteenth century', though concedes that women could feel more independence than their eastern counterparts, and that marriages were perhaps more 'equal partnerships'. See George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 8th edn. (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010), 586-587. The exclusion of women from history textbooks, however, is a broader issue. See Roger Clark, Jeffrey Allard and Timothy Mahoney, 'How Much of the Sky? Women in American High School History Textbooks from the 1960s, 1980s and 1990s', *Social Education*, 68 no. 1 (2004).

[52] Riley, 'Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies', 217.

[53] Ibid., 225.

[54] Smyth, *Nobody's Girl Friday*; Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*; Hallett in particular studied female silent Western stars in early twentieth-century Hollywood; from the same decade in which *RDR's* fictional narrative is actually set, outlining the success of certain female stars in silent and serial Westerns the first two decades of the twentieth century in particular. See Hillary Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

[55] See Ibid., especially 50, 59-62; 105.

Despite the fact players predominantly meet and interact with Bonnie and Abigail in their homes and on their ranches – and thus in spaces which are not necessarily coded as 'masculine'[56] – from the outset, all three 'major' women are portrayed as operating within a specific context, occupying the role of singular women in male landscapes. When speaking to Bonnie about Abigail, Marston tells her 'In many ways, my wife is kind of like you, Miss MacFarlane […] She's always been a woman in a man's world'.[57] Moreover, Bonnie is defined entirely by being a 'headstrong woman working in a man's world' in the brief 'bio' assigned to her on the official *RDR* website.[58] Indeed, all three of the 'major' women characters in *RDR* are the sole female presence in small, male-dominated microcosms. Though they have reasonably vital functions in terms of both the gameplay and narrative progression, this line of dialogue, which is repeated word-for-word when Marston later describes Bonnie to Abigail in the final act of the game, fundamentally asserts the inherent presupposition that the West is a man's world, and that women are individual elements within it.

Of all these women, the player spends the most time interacting with Bonnie. She is portrayed as fiercely self-sufficient and independent, and is instrumental in guiding the player through the game, as well as serving the specific narrative function of having saved Marston's life during the game's opening mission. Aside from a handful of unnamed NPCs, she seems to be the only woman on MacFarlane's Ranch with any significance – or at least, the only women Marston/the player interacts with – and takes principal responsibility for its running to help her father. Bonnie tells Marston that when her brother left for New York, she was forced to 'become the man of the ranch'.[59] Largely, the narrative implies that while she can talk the talk of the hypocrisies of entrenched gender roles, Bonnie succeeds in maintaining and running the Ranch, despite adversities, principally due to her adoption of a male role within her family structure, and abandonment of traditional female ones. Conversations between Bonnie and Marston in early missions occasionally turn to the fact that she is unwed. While Marston calls her 'quite a catch', she has resisted marriage due to the lack of male potential in her world, 'a

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[56] As Lee Clark Mitchell discusses, 'what is striking about the Western […] is the way the West is associated quite specifically with masculinity. Indeed, the genre's delight in the male physique duplicates its affection lingering over a fantastic landscape we have come to recognize as "the Far West," a landscape defined as "western" by the absence of familiar signs encoded as female—the pastures, fields, farms, and more obviously schoolyards, church steeples, and store window displays that signal the domestication of space.' Mitchell, 'Violence in Film Westerns', 178.

[57] From mission 'Wild Horses, Tamed Passions'.

[58] 'Bonnie Macfarlane', in 'Character Bios', *Red Dead Redemption Official Website,* http://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption/features/people [accessed 21 August 2018].

[59] From mission 'Wild Horses, Tamed Passions'.

ranch in the middle of Hennigan's Stead', where the men are too 'countrified' for her tastes.[60] Bonnie's proto-feminist credentials, supposed strength and independent mind frequently feature in her conversations with Marston. Bonnie often makes remarks such as 'There's certain things in this country a woman could do much better, if you ask me',[61] which Marston always agrees with. For example, in assessing her value, Marston remarks that 'You're worth two of any man I know, Miss'.[62]

Bonnie's dialogue also frequently challenges gender assumptions. In one mission, Bonnie sarcastically suggests that Marston/the player take the reins, because 'It wouldn't do for a terrifying bounty hunter such as yourself to be driven around by a woman'.[63] Of course, this has a more immediate function than challenging deeply inscribed gender roles: it allows players to learn the basics of horse-drawn-wagon driving, and thus teach the player skills vital to progress through the game itself. This satire of 'the way things were' does not exist in and of itself; it exists to justify necessary gameplay sequences that are carried out by the player's control of Marston.

Hillary Hallett overviews the work of film scholars on female stars of Westerns in Hollywood's silent era: that certain films' focus on female Western characters with 'authentic bravery and athleticism sold fans "a fantasy of female power"', but this fantasy was ultimately 'tempered' by the fact these women often 'required the intervention of a strong, male hand for success'.[64] Indeed, there is little doubt of Bonnie's bravery and strength. Various missions require Marston/the player to horse-race with her around the Ranch, while the 'Bonnie' missions also teach the player/Marston the fundamentals of marksmanship, how to break in horses and herd cattle. However, the missions that teach you how to fight, shoot, and approach battles with gangs of outlaw men are predominantly carried out under the narrative branches of the major male characters like the Sheriff, Marshall Johnson. Despite the fact that, in terms of her physical depiction,

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[60] From mission 'Wild Horses, Tamed Passions'. Yet Despite everything that has happened to her, and her success in maintaining the ranch for her family, her desire for a husband is inferred in her final appearance in the game, during a cutscene, as she watches John and Abigail driving away from the Ranch, gazing wistfully after the couple, and then to a male ranch hand who walks past her ['Old Friends, New Problems']. After the official end of the game, players can learn by reading the final edition of *The Blackwater Ledger* that Bonnie has married; though it does not say to who, symbolically it does not matter. The edition can be purchased by players in-game when controlling Jack Marston, after his father's death, in the game's epilogue.

[61] From mission 'Wild Horses, Tamed Passions'.

[62] From mission 'Wild Horses, Tamed Passions'.

[63] 'This is Armadillo, USA' [cutscene]. When Abigail and Bonnie meet in the final act of the game, this kind of humour is again evoked when Abigail tells her husband 'If you're gonna start yammerin' about women's work, John, I'd say you might be in the wrong company.' From mission 'Old Friends, New Problems'.

[64] Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood*, 49.

personality, and narrative context, Bonnie's character is clearly heavily inspired by the depiction of Annie Stoakes in *Revolver,* she herself is never depicted (in gameplay or cutscenes) defending her ranch against violent aggressors. Annie is both controlled by the player in an isolated mission to fulfil exactly that objective, and is also depicted in the wider game narrative participating in direct violent confrontation with male characters.[65] Objectives in 'Bonnie' missions, on the other hand, are confined to the most mundane of Western actions, as even players have commented online: where '[m]ost of this game is amazing', in the missions set by women 'you can forget about all that fun'.[66]

'Real' Western action is confined to the missions in which Marston is accompanied by men and is required to perform violent actions or feats of bravery and survival. Resultantly, while in most promotional images Bonnie is depicted wielding weaponry, and the blog post on Pearl Hart claims Bonnie is 'known to be more than capable with a gun', it seems unclear how the player is meant to know this, other than the fact that she is often seen carrying a gun, but not using it (for example, *figure 17*).[67]

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[65] Indeed, Annie's character remains throughout *Revolver's* wider narrative an agent in her own fortunes, taking part as the only female in a duelling 'Battle Royale' for a prize of $5000, and assisting the protagonist, Red Harlow and other male characters Jack Swift and the African-American Buffalo Soldier (who she saves from the Governor's prison), in the final mission of the game, in a violent confrontation with the corrupt Governor's men, using her rifle to accompany the player (controlling Red) toward the game's end goal.

[66] This is specifically discussed in the specific subsection 'Miss, this mission ya' gave me sucks'. The article's tone is tongue in cheek, but the points are largely grounded in what the game offers. See Seanbaby, '6 Things *Red Dead Redemption* Taught Me About (Hating) Women', 10 June 2010, *Cracked,* http://www.cracked.com/blog/6-ways-red-dead-redemption-hates-women/ [accessed 2 November 2015].

[67] In the first compulsory game mission set by Bonnie, 'New Friends, Old Problems', John must accompany her while patrolling the Ranch. The mission teaches the player how to use the game's weapon controls by requiring them to shoot at rabbits that are stealing crops, and coyotes that are stealing chickens. In both instances, Bonnie will carry and point a rifle at the animals, and shout encouragement to the player, but will very rarely actually shoot, leaving the player to actually score the 'kills'. Arguably, this is a programmed response to give players the chance to learn fundamental controls, however in both instances Bonnie appears to be carrying the gun for little purpose.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 17. Bonnie Macfarlane downloadable wallpaper.[68]

Despite suggestions of her strength and independence – in either paratexts like downloadable wallpapers or the 'True West' posts, or textually as the ostensible head of a Ranch and saving Marston's life – in 'Hanging Bonnie Macfarlane', one of the few missions where Bonnie is present in the midst of a large gunfight with bandits, she has been kidnapped and is about to be lynched. Rape is used as a threat when the bandits try to negotiate terms with Marshall Johnston, Bonnie's father, and Marston, before the player must ride out to rescue her. While Hallett notes the potential of eroticism in the view of female fans of early Westerns – in which women's experiences 'oscillate between aggression and subservience, pleasure and pain' – Hallett argues that 'as specifically western heroines these actresses needed to be able to both cause and tolerate acute physical distress in order to prove their valour and achieve the type of progress equated with the continent's conquest', which was similarly a 'hallmark' of iconic Western masculinity.[69] But Bonnie is never afforded space as part of any real action, in this mission or others, and thus is never truly given the chance to cause the kind of 'physical distress' inflicted on her. Rather, she is always on the receiving end of their attacks, whether to her own person or her family's ranch, or inferred attacks on her as a sex object.

Because of *RDR*'s gameplay affordances and their privileging of the white male perspective via Marston, to fulfil the power fantasy it is always the player that must be

[68] From 'Downloads', *Red Dead Redemption official website,* http://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption/downloads [accessed 20 April 2017].
[69] Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood*, 59.

able to 'save the day' for the NPCs, whether male or female. Yet it means that women like Bonnie can only ever occupy the role of 'damsel in distress',[70] never given the power to bring their own retaliation or be their own protector. To do so would require Rockstar offering players the chance to occupy the female perspective. Revealingly, where this is present in games like *Revolver*, it is dismissed as an experience that doesn't 'play like a Rockstar game.'

Confining Bonnie to a mostly pedagogical role for the player – albeit a major one – is perhaps both a blessing and a curse. She occupies a role in the early stages of the game in which players are still being taught the basics. While they are still undertaking missions largely for the sake of getting used to the various gameplay sequences and mechanics that will be required in various combinations in later missions. Additionally, her use in the narrative is more or less confined to MacFarlane's Ranch, and her usefulness in driving the narrative (and indeed, most of her direct participation in it) ends after the player/Marston has saved her from Bill Williamson's gang, and the Marshall agrees to assist in tracking down the men Marston seeks. Indeed, directly following the mission 'Hanging Bonnie MacFarlane', Marston/the player has no further substantive interaction with her until the end of the game. Once an authoritative male figure enters the situation, Bonnie's role is made redundant. She serves her function, and then is dismissed.

The second major female character introduced is Luisa Fortuna. Luisa is also portrayed as independent, and helps organise campaigns for the Mexican resistance. Luisa is introduced as a character in the game's second act after a mission during which she saved from a military prison by Marston and another white-American former-outlaw, Landon Ricketts. Though she provides activation for three missions from her own branch of gameplay – taking over from Ricketts in guiding the player through the Rebel's half of the Mexico missions – the resistance side of the narrative is taken over and completed by missions set by Abraham Reyes, the actual leader of the Revolution. Furthermore, Luisa is ultimately shot and killed by a group of soldiers before she can inflict any damage on them or achieve anything, while trying to save Reyes from capture; a man who had promised to marry her purely to have sex with her, almost never remembers her name or who she is, and continues to be depicted having graphic sex with other 'peasant' women before and after Luisa's death.[71] Though defined in the 'True West' blog posts as 'a driven

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[70] Anita Sarkeesian, 'Damsel in Distress Part 1– Tropes vs Women', *FeministFrequency*, 7 March 2013, https://feministfrequency.com/video/damsel-in-distress-part-1/ [accessed 1 October 2016].
[71] As in the opening cutscenes to the mission 'The Gates of El Presido', for example.

young Mexican girl doing what she has to[,] to help her family',[72] she is caught in both the inherent maleness of *RDR*'s coding of the West, and as a sole female addition to a metanarrative of Mexican Revolution dominated by men, who wantonly inflict sexual violence on women as a sign of their ambiguous morality – a convenient 'moral disengagement' factor.[73]

Abigail Marston is the third and final of the major women characters in the game. When she appears for the final missions, she is hardly the docile, nurturing rancher's wife who maintains the homestead for her husband and child, despite the Marstons' inclinations to do so and leave their past behind. She bemoans both her own and her husband's lack of education, and their rough-around-the-edges nature. She can't cook, and thus fails in even the most basic of domestic duties. She is coarse with both her language and affections: attacking Marston when they are reunited, responding to his professions of how much he missed her by hitting him, calling him a 'no-good, hillbilly, piece of shit'.[74] Her purpose in the game's narrative is to provide missions that re-situate Marston, and therefore the player, in a domestic settings: chasing away pests that are eating the crops or accompanying Marston while he visits the MacFarlane Ranch to help them with a harvest. The missions are the polar opposite of those that have occupied the majority of the middle chapters of the game – filled with hunts for bounties and shootouts against gangs. Yet in that sense, they are very similar to those provided by Bonnie: largely confined to a domestic space, completing gameplay objectives that are largely mundane in comparison for the hunt for Dutch Van Der Linde and his former associates.

But despite her fierceness when she does appear as an NPC, speaking her own (limited) dialogue, her character by that point has already been preestablished via exchanges with other characters who knew her; usually between her husband and other outlaws like Bill Williamson, Javier Escuela, and Dutch. In these instances, the only thing players come to know about her is the fact she was a prostitute – or rather, a 'whore' – who ran with Dutch's gang before marrying Marston. Moreover, Marston is regularly the subject of scorn by his former associates *for* marrying her, whereby she is used as ammunition to taunt him. While chasing Escuela on horseback in Mexico, two of the lines of dialogue Escuela shouts to taunt the player/Marston is 'Who is Abigail beasting

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[72] 'Bad Guys Gone Good…and Vice Versa - Part Two: Pearl Hart'.
[73] For overview of 'moral disengagement' in violent video games, see Tilo Hartmann, 'The "Moral Disengagement in Violent Videogames" Model', *Game Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017).
[74] From mission 'The Outlaw's Return'.

with now huh?', and 'Did Abigail miss me?'.[75] As the player pursues Bill Williamson in the following mission, he gloats 'I fucked with Abigail, we all did.'[76] In one of the final confrontations with Dutch, he tells Marston and the room full of federal agents waiting to apprehend him: 'You always were the romantic sort. You know, gentlemen, this man here, he married a whore. Used to ride with us. We all had her, but he married her, and you know that makes him a better man than us. He's a better man'.[77] Her status as an object that all of the gang supposedly had sex with is used to ridicule Marston's supposed standing as an 'honourable', decent family man who has tried to improve his position.

Little information is given in *RDR* or its paratexts about Abigail,[78] her backstory, or the conditions that led her to join up with Dutch's gang. The only thing that can be inferred is that she was a prostitute, and used sex as a way to survive. Many cinematic and televisual Westerns feature prostitutes; and indeed, they form one half of the binary opposites Rockstar's blog define as outmoded and stereotypical. Yet in some Westerns, sex workers are shown as having power, influence and economic means because of their work; think perhaps *Unforgiven, Deadwood*, or *Godless* (Netflix, 2017). None of these are unproblematic examples of depictions of sex workers in the West, let alone of women's role there. Yet they *are* both pre-existing and more recent examples whereby these women are not merely the butt of jokes, or can use their capital for their own means, even in the face of violence against them.

Bonnie Ruberg has argued that in representing sex workers, video games often perpetuate harmful discourses on the value of sex workers' labour, offering a 'fantasy of exceptionalism' in spaces designed specifically for a mainstream target audience of white cisgender males. This is compounded by the fact that pre-existing critiques of video games' depiction of sex work often simply 'operate from the premise that depicting sex workers […] inherently promotes the exploitation of women and further marginalizes women characters in an admittedly already sexist medium.'[79] Ruberg challenges that these criticisms, under the guise of being feminist, have an undertone of hostility to and discrimination against sex work(ers), and are in themselves actually both 'misguided and harmful.'[80] Conversely, it is more productive – and less patronising – to take video games

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[75] From mission 'The Gates of El Presido'.
[76] From mission 'An Appointed Time'.
[77] From mission 'Great Men Are Not Always Wise'.
[78] Abigail is not given a specific entry like Bonnie and Luisa on the official website's 'character bios' page.
[79] Ruberg, 'Representing Sex Workers in Video Games', 6–8.
[80] Ibid., 6–8. Ruberg pushes back against the well-meaning and important, but in many ways 'misguided' claims made by Anita Sarkeesian's *FeministFrequency* video series in particular.

to task for the way that they use sex workers as characters, but ultimately undermine the value of their labour; addressing *how* they are represented, rather than opposing their representation in general.[81]

As Ruberg notes, citing Ian Bogost,[82] that '[b]ecause games are designed around rule sets and mechanics, they not only portray characters and narratives on-screen but also translate social constructs into playable systems that can themselves be analysed for their social meaning'. *RDR*, as with the *GTA* games that Ruberg uses as an example, thus mimic pervasive discriminatory socio-cultural attempts at 'the denial of sexual labour *as* labour.'[83] While in *RDR* Abigail's entire existence until the end of the game is defined both in relation to Marston and by her status as just a gang whore, what makes this all the more harmful as a representation is that even if she was a prostitute, the value of her labour is entirely non-existent. That is, she is an object of ridicule that all male members in the gang used and passed around; because they could, not because she was working to ensure her own survival in a harsh world and with limited means, or as a member of a pseudo-family unit. Abigail is only ever represented as at the behest of these men's sexual desires or Marston's wife, not as having much agency in and of herself. The strength she exhibits and the ability to supposedly 'look after herself' in the face of adversity is a superficial layer on top of a characterisation that too often reduces her to merely Marston's weak spot.

RDR differs from *GTA* in that, while it includes saloon women among its many nameless, personality-less NPCs, it does not allow players to actively pay for or have sex.[84] Therefore, players are prevented from killing sex workers and taking their money back, as the former franchise is infamous for.[85] Yet both narrative objectives and non-narrative gameplay elements of *RDR* allow the player to brutalise women, or watch women being brutalised, in a number of ways, should they choose. In one of *RDR*'s 'Stranger' missions, 'Eva in Peril', the player can choose to save Eva – a woman Marston discovers being beaten by the man who 'owns' her – by purchasing her freedom. After sending her to a convent, Marston/the player can check on her to see how she is doing, but is told by one of the nuns that a man came to collect her, and she is no longer there. In the final

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[81] Ibid., 8.
[82] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 3.
[83] Ruberg, 'Representing Sex Workers in Video Games', 4.
[84] This likely has more to do with Marston's characterisation as an honest married man with morals, rather than any decision to exclude this on Rockstar's part; *GTAV* resumed the ability to pick up and sleep with sex workers, and visit strip clubs.
[85] Ruberg, 'Representing Sex Workers in Video Games', 11–12.

encounter of the mission, Marston finds the man burying Eva's body, after having murdered her, and must kill the man in a duel at the graveside.[86] Eva has almost no lines of dialogue to speak, and exists as another plot device that allows the game to advance its portrayal of Marston as an honourable man who uses violence as a means to exercise justice and revenge. What's more, after paying for a woman's freedom from a man who is presumably her pimp, killing him and completing this Stranger mission allows you to take at least part of the money paid back. Compensated for Eva's lack of freedom and status as property, this is arguably only one step removed from the (pre-programmed) ability to kill sex workers and recoup money found in *GTA* games.

Perhaps the most revealing thing that players can do to women in the game is exemplified by an unlockable achievement called 'Dastardly'. To be awarded it, the player is required to kidnap and hogtie a random female NPC, carry her to a set of train tracks, and watch as a train runs her down. This achievement is 'secret', so the player will not be aware it is something they will be rewarded for doing until they have actually done it.[87] Rather than being a suggestion on the part of the developers, then, it implies anticipation of players' possible actions in the game, facilitated by what the gameplay mechanics will allow – while it is not a forced or required action, doing so ensures that the player will be rewarded in the same way they are rewarded for, for example, skinning and killing eighteen grizzly bears. On the article for this achievement/trophy on the Red Dead Wiki, players have complied a list of 'Tips and Tricks' for doing this, which includes suggestions such as: 'Thieves' Landing is a good location to hogtie a woman because there is no law in this town, therefore Marston will not get a bounty if he commit any crimes', and 'If one isn't comfortable with killing innocent women (or losing Honor for doing so), remember that unlike the other criminal gangs, the Banditos contain a few women'. The player might presumably therefore feel less guilty for abducting and violently murdering one of the few nameless female banditos, rather than a woman who is supposedly 'innocent', or at least will circumvent the loss of 'honor' points or accumulating a bounty on their head, preserving their otherwise 'good' behaviour.[88] These 'tips and tricks' are compiled by players who contribute to *RDR*'s fan site. It suggests this is normative, even perhaps

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[86] From Stranger mission 'Eva in Peril'.

[87] In the sense that the achievement does not appear in the visible list of achievements players can access via consoles, which lists and instructs players what to do in order to unlock them.

[88] There are many other suggestions of how to best unlock this achievement trophy, found in subsection 'Tips and Tricks', in article 'Dastardly', *Red Dead Wikia,* http://reddead.wikia.com/wiki/Dastardly [accessed 1 November 2015].

expected behaviour – something that Rockstar presumes the player will want to do, and will explicitly nod in recognition when they do so.

These varying narrative and gameplay representations of women in Rockstar's West betrays how heavily influenced by both cinematic Western conservatism, and a lack of influential female representations in Western history which have made any impact on popular perceptions of this period. You would be forgiven for thinking, based on this vision of 'the West', that the New Western History had never happened, and accounts like Dee Brown's *The Gentle Tamers* – which told the stories of women in a diversity of professions and survived just as well as men in 'the Old Wild West' – were not readily available to consult as the basis for rounded female characters who have just as much to offer as male ones.[89] Despite actually dedicating an entire blog post to the history of Pearl Hart, and acknowledging that Western women do not simply fall into neatly opposing categories, the game still conforms to a type of Western media product that reinforces that 'the West' was dominated by white men, with only a scattering of (predominantly white) women, who on surface level are portrayed as 'strong' and independent, yet are easily cut down by or reduced to merely their capacity to have sex with or be sexually abused.

Jane Tompkins identifies this sort of character construction within the Western genre more 'generally': '[women characters] may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble', and usually, they crumble into outpourings of words (which Tompkins suggests are only a woman's weapon, not the man's), or to nothing at all.[90] Bonnie uses her words to tease John consistently throughout the game, only to 'crumble' into repeated 'thank-yous' and making desperate jokes about her almost-hanging when she is rescued. Abigail breaks down into sobs and meaningless ramblings over Marston's dead body after he is killed, clutching to her son at his graveside. Luisa crumbles into nothing as she is shot dead by soldiers.[91] Though these are inherently Western women, born and raised in the same geographic landscape as the male characters, in this way, *RDR*'s Western women are much the same as the other Western women Tompkins defines: though they initially appear to

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[89] Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973).
[90] Tompkins, *West of Everything,* 61-62.
[91] Even the minor characters respond in this way: Clara crumbles into a rant about how much she loves the man who took advantage of her, got her pregnant, and threw her out, when learning of his death; Rose can be hogtied and carried to the feet of her abusive husband in the saloon, and then sit next to him crying; Jenny speaks to God or no one in particular, hysterical and hallucinating, left to presumably die in the middle of the wilderness after refusing Marston/the player's help.

have substance, in the end 'there's nothing *to* them'.[92] This exposes the extent to which films provide more of the substance for Rockstar's Western women than the 'real', complex women of history they appear to signal knowledge of. They may have cited a 'real' woman to legitimise their own engagement with women's place in the past. But the way that women are generally 'overlooked', aside from a few examples that support a male narrative, follows more so in the vein of Turnerian view of the West, rather than sharing Turner's contemporary William Cody's attitude that 'women had helped develop the West and […] females in his audience wanted to learn about such women.'[93]

RDR is not alone in this respect, and is not the only example of a contemporary Western that explicitly marginalises the role of women in Frontier life. Indeed, some of the most recent Western cinematic examples continue to code the West as an inherently male space, to the extent that even films that are expressly *about* women find it difficult to push their representations to work outside of this norm. For example, the critical reception to *Jane Got a Gun* (2016), a Natalie Portman-driven passion-project about one woman's fight for her family's independence, largely assumed to have been new kind of 'feminist' Western, similarly missed many of the marks that could have defined it as a truly revisionist film that incorporated female narratives and allowed women to act for themselves. One review asked 'Did it strive to fill in the blanks about all the women missing from traditional westerns – the negative space around male heroes – their stories rendered invisible by histories and genre fiction written largely by men?'[94] The answers the film seemed to offer these questions – to feature a woman in an apparently starring role, wielding her own weapon – were unsatisfactory, depicting her incapable of protecting her family without the help of another Western man: 'it is clear that simply putting women on screen and letting them occasionally talk or fire a gun isn't enough'.[95] Moreover, discussions around this film lead to a wider debate about the role of women in historic and more contemporary Westerns. A *Guardian* feature around the time drew attention to the fact female stars or women-centric films have been historically overlooked, highlighting that 'Bona fide westerns in which female characters draw guns

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[92] Tompkins, *West of Everything,* 61-62.
[93] Riley, 'Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies', 225.
[94] Lindy West, 'Jane Got a Gun is not a feminist western – unless by "feminist" you mean "contains a woman"', *The Guardian,* 24 April 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/24/jane-got-gun-not-feminist-western-lindy-west?CMP=share_btn_fb [accessed 24 April 2016].
[95] Ibid.

are still considered aberrations,' despite there being very many 'splendid ones'. Thus, even though 'Jane Got a Gun […] most women in westerns still don't'.[96]

Moreover, the recent Netflix series *Godless* was explicitly marketed as a show about women in the West, in a town where all of the men had been killed; making it literally 'no man's land.'[97] Yet in substance, reviews questioned why it had chosen to take this stance at all. The show is not actually so much about the women's lives as it is the comparatively few male characters and their pursuit of each other.[98] Only twenty-seven percent of lines were spoken by women in the first episode, as opposed to seventy-three by men.[99] The showrunner was explicit in interviews that the show was not intended as the 'feminist western' that Netflix sought to sell it as, but was originally conceived as a show 'about fathers and sons.'[100] Where women in Westerns are concerned it seems, the politics of paratexts are more often than not in direct competition with the politics of the text itself. Furthermore, where westerns explicitly labelled as feminist either flop (*Jane Got A Gun)* or prove to be lacking in in their marketed feminist credentials (*Godless*), Westerns that are resolutely brutal and male-dominated depictions of the 'real Wild West' win accolades and prestige (*The Revenant* [2015] or *Hell or High Water* [2016]).

Making Fun of Masculinity?

Rather than just being an example of a wider cultural trend, *RDR* is also perhaps directly culpable in perpetuating it. For example, while promoting HBO's *Westworld* (2016-) the showrunners Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy professed that video games – and *RDR* specifically – were as much of an influence on the show as the original source material

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[96] Anne Bilson, 'Jane Got a Gun - but most women in westerns still don't', *The Guardian,* 21 April 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/21/jane-got-a-gun-most-women-in-westerns-dont [accessed 21 April 2016].

[97] One of the teaser trailers released by Netflix was entitled 'Welcome to No Man's Land'. See 'Godless | Teaser: Welcome to No Man's Land [HD] | Netflix', *YouTube* uploaded by Netflix, 16 October 2017, 'https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4u98XY52Rbk [accessed 20 July 2018].

[98] Britt Hayes, 'Netflix Wants You To Think "Godless" is a Series About Women. It's Not.', *Screen Crush,* 17 November 2017, http://screencrush.com/netflix-wants-you-to-think-godless-is-a-series-about-women-its-not/ [Accessed 17 November 2017].

[99] Tweet by @innesmck, 22 November 2017, https://twitter.com/innesmck/status/933470195208908800 [accessed 22 November 2017].

[100] Riley Chow, 'Scott Frank ('Godless' showrunner): 'Feminist western' was originally about fathers and sons', *Gold Derby*, 30 May 2018, https://www.goldderby.com/article/2018/scott-frank-godless-feminist-western-netflix-jeff-daniels-video-interview-news/amp/?__twitter_impression=true [accessed 18 July 2018].

(*Westworld* [1973]). Taking on overtly 'video game' themes and structures,[101] the show, in some ways, drew attention to the way Western narratives have historically been authored and dominated by men and largely serve as white-male power fantasies.[102] Yet it did so by relying on Western tropes and conventions, and consigning the parks female 'hosts' to roles as sex robots there to be brutalised by visitors (largely wealthy men, as far as the show depicts). While the second season works to undercut some of this male control, by relying on these typically Western stereotypes to do so, it makes the potential for critical readings dubious at best, and the show's politics ultimately ambiguous.

As I have argued, the same hazy approach to Western revisionism is present in *RDR*. Without considering Rockstar's paratextual marketing of the game, scholars are often keen to emphasise its reliance on 'revisionist' Westerns as source material,[103] or that it is outright revisionist in its outlook, especially in terms of the cycles of masculine violence passed down between generations.[104] Though the notion of the 'revisionist' Western needs to be contested, as discussed in chapter three, it would indeed be an oversimplification to say that *RDR* was not self-conscious or self-critical about its own depictions of violent masculinity. It may be read in terms of its attempts at parodying hypocrisies or crises in masculinity, through the prism of the Western genre. Any man who is not a Westerner – especially 'learned' Eastern 'men of science' like Harold MacDougal and Nigel West Dickens, or writers like Jimmy Saint – are demonstrated to be wholly unsuited for life in the real Wild West they wish to study. As noted, Bonnie regularly ascribes even Marston's beliefs and values as romanticised and outmoded. In two notable instances she directly compares things he says to dime-novel conceptions of Western life, either by remarking 'Well, that sounds very fun, Mr. Marston. Quite heroic. just like those Penny Dreadfuls my brother used to read', or 'What dreadful novel did you get that romanticised drivel out of? Those days are long gone, if they were ever here at all.'[105] Thus, either Eastern men are stupid for their lack of experience in the West, or Western men are stupid for their subscription to the values of a West that doesn't, or never did exist, but still try and enact the values and violence the myth supposedly encompassed. It is perhaps little wonder that, as Jane Kuenz highlights, the loose period

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[101] Simon Cox and Chris Sullentrop, 'Is HBO's "Westworld" Really About Video Games?', *Rolling Stone,* 7 October 2016, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/is-hbos-westworld-really-about-video-games-187980/ [accessed 7 October 2016].
[102] Wright, 'Writing "The West" In Westworld'.
[103] For example, Triana, 'Red Dead Masculinity'.
[104] Buel, 'Playing (with) the Western'.
[105] From missions 'New Friends, Old Problems', and 'This is Armadillo, USA'.

in which *RDR* is set was a time in which American middle-class white men in particular felt a strain on 'traditional notions of masculine identity' – in the post-Civil War society and economy, masculinity 'grounded in an ethic of individuals and self-production confronted an economy where that ethic no longer had a sure place.'[106]

At the Blackwater cinema[107] – one of two that can be visited to watch short films – a silent film plays entitled 'Damsels Causing Distress', and stars a character called 'Beaumont the Burly'.[108] Where the clip has been uploaded to YouTube, the user describes the film as 'a propaganda film about Women's Suffrage.'[109] It initially shows a man lifting weights until a woman walks by, turns her nose up at him, and walks away, to which he exclaims 'Tis usual that such performance doth wilt gentle women such as this…Curious! What perverse distractions indwell upon the weaker sex?' The film follows his 'investigations' into what is going on, and continues to portray women in a variety of seemingly masculine or unfeminine situations: in the street, gambling, engaging in construction work, or scorning his advances. He happens upon a 'domestic', in which a woman threatens her husband with a gun, and abandons her children and her 'duties' to 'smoke opium' and indulge in 'pleasures of the flesh'. Following this, a female baby hits the male child over the head with a rolling pin, and follows her mother out of the shot. Even Beaumont's wife refuses him their 'marital congress', sitting in bed while reading a book entitled 'Suffrage: A Woman's Right to Vote', before leaving home to 'fight for change in the election'. Finally happening upon a Suffrage rally, he takes the stage and tells the women to 'Return home as it near suppertime', before he is set upon by the women who tie him up and leave him on the train tracks; an ironic nod to the 'Dastardly' achievement, perhaps. The cartoon figure of Uncle Sam is shown tied up next to him, before 'Don't turn Uncle Sam into Aunt Samantha. It is your patriotic imperative to oppose women's suffrage' is displayed on screen, ending the film.

Tongue-in-cheek as it may be, the short film takes aim at the very nature of masculinity in crisis, threatened by increased calls for women's voting rights, while

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[106] See Kuenz's full discussion of this shift in notions of masculinity, due mainly to the economic and social changes of the post-War period in Jane Kuenz, 'The Cowboy Businessman and "The Course of Empire": Owen Wister's "The Virginian"', *Cultural Critique* 48 (2001): 98–128.

[107] As the political centre of New Austin, Blackwater is the most Eastern settlement on the map, and is home to a Bank, Courthouse, and the offices of the Federal Marshals. It might be fair to assume that at least some of the critiques levelled in this film are also aimed at the way Eastern civility emasculates Western men, as is the use of the link between Eastern men and emasculation.

[108] In the game's IMDb production credits, Dan Houser is noted as one of three writers of this and the other silent film featured in the game.

[109] See description for 'Red Dead Redemption: Beaumont the Burly', *YouTube*, uploaded by William48151623, 19 May 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChIuk4mLTdw [accessed 20 October 2015].

depicting it as bound up with the very idea of American identity itself. But scenes like this that Rockstar have historically used in their games – sometimes used to dismiss the notion that their games should be 'taken seriously' – often 'use humour as a prextext to convey harmful depictions of women.'[110] Thus, where they appear to make fun of masculinity in silent films like 'Damsels Causing Distress', they do so by (re)constructing negative stereotypes of women fighting to gain equal rights in early-twentieth century America. Once again, this instance of 'satire' or 'irony' – as a core part of their brand – allows Rockstar to 'have their cake and eat it too', performing subversives while leaving harmful representations intact.[111]

The game's Stranger missions also work to ridicule the construction of masculinity present in the genre itself. For example, in the mission 'Lights, Camera, Action', players encounter fictional filmmaker D. S. Mackenna and rescue his main star, Silas Spatchcock, who has gone missing. After training to 'play' an Old West movie hero went to his head, Spatchcock is now travelling the territory of New Austin believing himself to be a true Westerner – which, by disarming him in a duel, and proving the 'real' Westerner's superior marksmanship, the player/Marston inevitably must prove wrong). Mackenna believes that he is a pioneer of 'the future', and that filmmakers 'speak to a man's soul',[112] not only reinforcing the Western genre as a man's domain for the construction of masculinity, but this mission also suggests that the men within it are deluded idiots who let heroic myths go to their heads. Yet in doing so, it also less than subtly implies that the experiences of Marston, and therefore also that the player's experiences, are all the more realistic or authentic; that they are the 'real' and skilled Westerner by comparison.

Thus, in many ways it does poke fun at assumed gender roles, constructions of masculinity in the Western, and takes aim at men as much as it does women. As explored previously, the kind of 'revisionist' Westerns that Rockstar evoke in 'Rockstar Recommends' are from the outset attributed to filmmakers of this late-60s wave like Sam Peckinpah. Consider then, for example, the fact that Peckinpah is chosen to pay deference to rather than his contemporary Robert Altman, who made a number of Westerns around

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[110] Here the authors cite missions in *GTASA* as an example of this: the player, via the male protagonist, must play the role of pimp to a female prostitute. At the end of the mission, this is subverted and made to seem 'ironic' by the fact the prostitute will then pay the player to have sex. Yet, this is all done so through depictions of female prostitution, driven to clients and forced to pay money to a male 'boss'. See Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant, 'Bridging Games Studies and Feminist Theories', 31–32.
[111] Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*.
[112] From Stranger mission 'Lights Camera, Action'.

the same time. In contrast to the former, Altman is seen as a more overtly political director, making films that 'presented with a relatively clear political position',[113] not least in his treatment of topics like the Korean War in *M*A*S*H* (1970), and seeking deliberately to deconstruct Hollywood genres.[114] He is more specifically attributed to 'revisionist' Westerns such as *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971), or those that outright seek to 'debunk' Western myths and expose racist attitudes to Native Americans in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, Or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976).[115]

In comparison, Susan Kollin reads Peckinpah's work as more ideologically and politically ambiguous, owing to the fact that the director 'used parody' in his films, and did so 'in a manner that often subverted his critical vision.' That is, while seeking to depict a more so-called realistic, dystopic image of 'hyperviolent masculinity', 'his vision of the region [of the West itself] was much harder to discern', leading to scholarly disagreements as to 'the nature and scope of Peckinpah's 'treatment of the genre.'[116] In the same way defenders of Peckinpah were keen to argue that his general 'disdain' for humanity lessened the outright misogyny of his films, or at least subjected them to 'democratic' treatment,[117] just because Rockstar see themselves as offering a satirical view of America does not mean they do not rely on and sustain harmful stereotypes to do so; even in their explorations of Western masculinity.

Kollin treats *Blood Meridian* in the same manner, arguing that McCarthy's use of parody to subvert Western conventions and codes makes his authorial intentions (and potential reader-reception) more ambiguous.[118] Kollin cites Forrest G. Robinson's argument that 'Western literary discourse often betrays a "pattern of doubleness," or what he calls "self-subversion," in which contradictory moral impulses compete for dominance in the narrative.'[119] As 'divided texts', then, Westerns can offer critiques of 'their own dominant logic', but these critiques are 'limited', as they can still seem to betray the legacy of the form they work within to subvert.[120]

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113 Kollin, 'Genre and the Geographies of Violence', 562.
114 Nelson, *Still in the Saddle*, 138.
115 Ibid., 137-140.
116 Kollin, 'Genre and the Geographies of Violence', 562–63.
117 As argued by Bill Mesce, *Peckinpah's Women*. Cited in Kitses, *Horizons West*, 203; See also Seydor, *Peckinpah*, xx.
118 Kollin, 'Genre and the Geographies of Violence', 563.
119 Ibid., 559; citing Forrest G. Robinson, *Having It Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 3.
120 Kollin, 'Genre and the Geographies of Violence', 561; summarising Robinson. To this end, Kollin also uses Judith Butler's essay 'Merely Cultural' to interrogate the issues of parody and how it makes a text's politics ambiguous. As Butler wrote: It is, I would argue, impossible to perform a convincing parody of an intellectual position without having a prior affiliation with what one parodies, without having and wanting

There is nothing particularly subversive about the 'recommendations' that Rockstar cite for players to view. As argued in chapter three, few of them are concerned with main characters that are anything other than white and male. Moreover, though films with acutely feminist-revisionist and critical stance toward the place of women in 'the West' were released in the same year (for example, Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* [2010][121]), *RDR* abjectly resists these same kinds of critiques, propping up a narrative in which women were the exception, not the norm in the narrative of Western American colonisation. The gameplay and narrative of *RDR* privileges the experience of masculinity, makes it seem normative, and is authenticated and legitimated by paratextual promotional discourses.

Despite poking fun, in typically Rockstar fashion, at certain mythical, romantic conceptions of masculinity – offering the kind of 'social satire' they are known for as part of their brand identity – ultimately the backbone of *RDR* is a narrative that depicts, and allows players only to experience the story of a certain kind of 'authentic' Westerner, which is unavoidably bound up in ideals of violent masculine heroics. These moments of 'satire' therefore do nothing to de-centre white men from the game's Western history. The implications of this for the kind of history *RDR* writes are profound. In trying to explore masculine identities and offer a 'real' history of what 'the West' was like, other histories and non-white-male identities get lost along the way.

L.A. Noire

LAN's 'official story trailer'[122] sets the tone for the way women are represented in the game. Though the parts of the 'story' that are included represent only around twenty-five percent of the game's possible cases, and some cutscenes that surround them, the reliance on these elements, and the manner of their inclusion is revealing. The opening voiceover, taken from a psychopathic, homeless army veteran who becomes a suspect in one of the

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an intimacy with the position one takes in or on as the object of parody.' Judith Butler, 'Merely Cultural', *Social Text* 52/53 (1997): 266.

[121] For exploration of the way *Meek's Cutoff* 'works to reassert women into the narrative of the West, while simultaneously allowing a critique of masculine versions of the past' and 'of masculine/colonizing historiographical representations', see Jerome de Groot, *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 57-61.

[122] Two identical trailers were uploaded to *YouTube* by Rockstar Games and IGN respectively, on January 24th 2011. The former's referred to the trailer as 'L.A. Noire Official Trailer #2', while the latter entitled it 'L.A. Noire Official Story Trailer'. See 'L.A. Noire Official Trailer #2', *YouTube,* uploaded by Rockstar Games, 24 January 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skAkfQr3e-4 [accessed 31 July 2018]; 'L.A. Noire Official Story Trailer', *YouTube,* uploaded by IGN, 24 January 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skAkfQr3e-4 [accessed 31 July 2011].

murders,[123] states: 'I don't know the names of the women I've killed, but I've killed many of them. The way they look at me, the way they flinch at my touch, so be it.'[124] What remains is a compilation of scenes in which Phelps investigates the murder of a series of women during the Homicide desk cases, intercut with cutscenes depicting his extramarital affair with German lounge singer Elsa Lichtmann, the downfall of his LAPD career. Thus, the trailer's content focusses exclusively on the murdered women in the homicide cases, and Phelps's illicit relationship with Elsa. These narrative elements epitomise the game's engagement with and representation of women in post-war American society, but this trailer is not the only way women are included in *LAN*'s paratextual promotional surrounding.

In an interview with *IGN* shortly before the game's release, Brendan McNamara was asked to explain the 'real' foundations for *LAN*, in support of the claim that 'Team Bondi is determined to deliver a believable experience'.[125] In this interview, McNamara explicitly occupies the role of developer-historian. When asked to 'set the stage' and discuss 'the state of the city of L.A. at the time',[126] he weaves a narrative that endeavours to encompass the various socio-economic, industrial, and cultural developments present in post-war Los Angeles. To paint a portrait of 'a city in transition' he cites a booming population, the rise of heavy and creative industries, and the 'lure' of the city, the 'weather' and 'lifestyle' it offered.[127] Moreover, he dedicates a significant amount of this historicising to what he describes as 'a time of great social tension':

> The war brought other changes. While the men were abroad fighting, a shortage of skilled labor forced women in to the workforce, taking on new roles, doing technical work, driving their own cars and making use of the newly created child-minding services. For the men to come back to find the women of the city newly independent and unchained from their narrow household duties meant a time of great social tension […] From our research, we found at least 10 very violent murders of women that went unsolved in the period just before the Black Dahlia in January 1947 and ending around 1950. Some of the cases you'll investigate while on the Homicide desk are inspired by those cases, and determining whether those murders were indeed linked in some way or simply the work of opportunistic copycats will be a big part of your time on that desk.[128]

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[123] From mission 'The Studio Secretary Murder'.
[124] 'L.A. Noire Official Story Trailer'.
[125] Hilary Goldstein, '*L.A. Noire*: A City Of Devils', *IGN*, 7 February 2011, http://uk.ign.com/articles/2011/02/07/la-noire-a-city-of-devils [accessed 3 March 2016].
[126] Ibid.
[127] Brendan McNamara in Ibid.
[128] Brendan McNamara in Ibid.

While a seemingly innocuous overview of a particular historical time and place, this is a highly generalised narrative of women's involvement in industry during the Second World War, and the fact that the game fictionalises the cases of certain women who were actually murdered in the period. These sweeping generalisations, moreover, re-inscribe long held misapprehensions, which have themselves been propped up by wider popular narratives of post-war American society.

For instance, D'Ann Campbell argued it was a 'misconception' that the women who found work during wartime were 'strangers to paid employment', even since the Depression era. Ninety-one percent of 'urban women born in 1915 […] had entered the workforce by 1938'. That is, even though most women quit their jobs when they married, 'paid employment before marriage had long been the norm in America'.[129] To suggest that the war had such a marked impact on women, newly 'unchained' from their household duties is a simplification: 'seven out of eight' of the women at home at the time of Pearl Harbor in 1941 were still at home in 1944.[130] Even women who did enter war work, particularly into symbolically 'male' jobs, found their inclusion and participation, their ability to integrate and 'identify', significantly 'curtailed'.[131]

Even though the war, Campbell argues, did cause 'an increase in the average number of women employed', at the peak of women's employment in 1945 they still only comprised 36% of the workforce.[132] There was no widespread revolution in terms of gender roles, or disruption of 'traditional working patterns'. There is no actual historical evidence 'of increased careerism' among women, and 'no indication that women's primary interest in home affairs was lessened', leaving care of their children to daycare facilities.[133] Further still, the likelihood of a couple divorcing was in general 'steadily increasing', and 'the war period marked no discontinuity' in this increase, despite the dissolution of hasty wartime marriages.[134] By paying attention to the views of 'ordinary' women themselves, not how the media or government portrayed and addressed them, Campbell finds evidence to support the claim that the war was not a watershed moment in terms of (white) women's liberation; society, women included, was not yet ready for a

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[129] D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, MA and London: Hardvard University Press, 1984), 72.
[130] Ibid., 77–80.
[131] Ibid., 8.
[132] Ibid., 74; According to official statistics from the Women's Bureau in 1953, cited by Campbell, this was only an increase of around ten percent of the overall workforce from 1940. See ibid., 239.
[133] Ibid., 83.
[134] Ibid., 88–89.

dramatic shift in deep-rooted values and roles.[135] Campbell, like many women's historians from the 1980s onwards, suggests that the picture of women's experiences in America (and the world) is more complex than the assessment of social and ideological 'disruption' offered by early twentieth century historiography and popular narratives of wartime.[136] Whether women's place was in the home or in a career was an ambiguous issue that both pre-dated the Second World War, and remained unresolved well into the post-war era.[137]

While he is keen to perform the role of developer-historian, and is afforded this position by interviewers, McNamara's claim for the authenticity of the game's engagement with women's history inevitably oversimplifies the picture of post-war American society, making sweeping generalisations about the impact of the war on men and women's roles – not to mention assuming the existence of a universal 'woman' which implicitly suggests whiteness as the norm. This hardly represents the diverse experiences of some '50 million different women, with different values, needs, resources, and obstacles to overcome' involved in the American war effort,[138] intersecting across the lines of sexuality, class, race, and more. However, what McNamara's suggestions *do* represent is an attempt to preserve of the outmoded notion – long-perpetuated by film scholars – that the woman as *femme fatale* was both a frequently-occurring figure in in *film noir*, and that she represented 'the dangerous threat of the independent woman of the

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[135] Ibid.

[136] As Susan Hartmann summarised in 1982, many new works on women in wartime presented an almost 'unanimous emphasis on continuity rather than change', and that historians' 'concertation on wars has left large gaps in our knowledge about women's recent past.' See Susan M. Hartmann, 'Review of *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II* by Karen Anderson; *Women, War and Revolution* by Carol R. Berkin, Clara M. Lovett; *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* by Gail Braybon; *Women, War and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States* by Maurine Weiner Greenwald', *Signs* 7, no. 4 (1982): 896; Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1982).

[137] Indeed, the claims of second-wave feminist works like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* actively challenged this image of disruption. As Friedan remarked in the early sixties, 'In the fifteen years after World War Two, [the] mystique of feminine fulfilment' – that is, the quintessential image of the career-averse American housewife with a husband and children – 'became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture' – arguably, at least, for the kinds of white, middle class women whose death *LAN* largely depicts. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 18. Historians have sought to unpick and offer counterpoints to Friedan's work, and its acute focus on white middle-class women. While, for example, Joanne Meyerowitz notes that mass culture (such as popular magazines) offered narratives that praised women's public work and careers outside the home, historical evidence affirms that popular discourse (across racial and class lines) often discussed women's domestic and non-domestic roles together, and that conservative anti-feminist and radical feminist positions both existed at the fringes. That is, women were not suddenly 'unshackled' from the domestic sphere en-masse, nor were they necessarily wholly-confined to it. See Joanne Meyerowitz, 'Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958', *The Journal of American History*, 79.4 (1993).

[138] Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 9.

wartime economy, and her containment and repression is essential to the rehabilitation of male authority and subjectivity after the war.'[139]

Almost inevitably, broadly-defining this period as one of 'social tension' leads McNamara to make direct links to the infamous 'Black Dahlia' murder of Elizabeth Short, whose life and death are frequent touchstones for discussions of the *femme fatale* (and women in general) in neo-*noir*.[140] This is one of a number of times in *LAN*'s promotional discourse that the 'Black Dahlia' is used as short-hand for the relationship between men and women in post-war America. At the article's close, the interviewer presses McNamara to return to the Black Dahlia, and in doing so he argues:

> For us it sets the tone for the brutality of the crimes of that year and for the harsh and glaring way those crimes were depicted in the media. In a lot of ways, the Black Dahlia case is an analogue for the whole LA experience: a small town beauty comes wide-eyed to LA to make it in the movies and finds out that city of dreams is also the place of nightmares. LA, like all major cities, can be a very hard place when you're down on your luck.[141]

To justify Team Bondi's decision to recreate Los Angeles 'faithfully', as opposed to Rockstar's tradition of creating fictionalised variants of real historic spaces and places, McNamara expresses that in their intention to create a 'realistic detective thriller game', 'real', 'unsolved' crimes 'were simply more interesting than we could ever dream up'. Therefore, virtually recreating the city as-it-was in 1947 was the only way to do justice to this source material, in his opinion, as well as giving 'the game and the crimes that take place within it a real feeling of authenticity'.[142]

The use of the highly-publicised murder of Short and other 'real' violent murders of women in the late-1940s as a foundation for one of *LAN*'s significant gameplay sections is emblematic of the ways in which the game's overarching narrative and individual gameplay sections use women – and particularly their bodies – as a *noir*-tinged

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[139] Mark Jancovich, 'Phantom Ladies: The War Worker, the Slacker and the "Femme Fatale"', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 2 (2010): 164–78167; As an example of these types of misleading accounts of the *femme fatale*, Jancovich cites Pam Cook, 'Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), 68–82.

[140] See for example Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), especially chapter 2; Katherine Farrimond, 'Postfeminist Noir: Brutality and Retro Aesthetics in The Black Dahlia', *Film & History* 43, no. 2 (2013): 34–49.

[141] Brendan McNamara in Goldstein, '*L.A. Noire:* A City of Devils'.

[142] Brendan McNamara in ibid; A similar interview feature published in *Paste* around the same time specifically highlighted the fact that, through *LAN*, players could now 'play' through/interact with a fictional reimagining of the Elizabeth Short murder, rather than simply watch or read about the numerous others that have featured elsewhere in popular culture. See Bo Moore, 'Interview: Team Bondi's Brendan McNamara Talks *L.A. Noire'*, *Paste Magazine*, 3 February 2011, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2011/02/interview-team-bondis-brendan-mcnamara-talks-la-no.html [accessed 3 March 2016].

lens through which to portray the past. The Homicide Desk specifically constructs women as objects to be investigated in the same way as other 'clues' to be discovered in the game world. In doing so, their inclusion ultimately supports a masculine-oriented 'historically accurate' experience, that legitimises itself in accordance with a 'zeitgeist' view of American (specifically Los Angeles) history.

In this view, women can only ever be victims of male rage, because Elizabeth Short *might* have been. The Black Dahlia case – as it so often does in '*noir*' popular culture – becomes, in David Fine's description, one of the 'authentic' 1940s crimes which are

> the 'texts' into which the 'context' of history have been grafted, or to put it differently, the 'pretexts' for telling larger stories; the crimes serve as occasions to investigate broader issues in local and national history. In works of fiction the headlined events become symbolic events that reveal not simply what happened but why, and the culpability is not narrowed to a specific individual, or even group, but spread across the culture.[143]

The stories of specific women who were murdered in 1947 are used to tell a story of 'social tension', of male fatalism, which is not only paratextually presented as authentic, but also conforms to longstanding trends in film criticism and historiography to categorise the post-war period (and Hollywood) as dark and brutal.[144] Yet in contrast to the way that *RDR*'s promotional discourse superficially adopts the rhetoric of the New Western History, and claims to offer an alternative to stereotypical Western depictions of women, *LAN*'s promotional discourse explicitly fashions historical and cinematic knowledge into a consumable, prefigurative discourse that reaffirms and re-inscribes masculine dominance onto the past. This has tangible consequences for the way women are both represented in, and largely confined to the Homicide section of the game, and how the game more broadly reshapes the trope of the *femme fatale*.

The *noir* 'zeitgeist', film criticism and historiography

Mike Chopra-Gant argues that 'noir is seen as more than a trend in film production; it is regarded as emblematic not only of the cinematic culture, but also of the tone of

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[143] David M. Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 209–10.
[144] For example, Lewis, *Hard-Boiled Hollywood*.

American culture generally in the period of postwar adjustment'.[145] Indeed, a preoccupation of critical work and scholarship on *film noir* tends to place much emphasis on the role the style plays in expressing or reflecting a particular period in which society and masculinity was seen to be 'in crisis'. Chopra-Gant and Hanson, for example, have argued in particular that this 'zeitgeist' approach to American history and cinema history has privileged a proclivity for stating that the *film noir* style shows the true nature of American society at the time – its darkness and negativity – even though the same concerns (and moreover, *optimistic* sentiments too[146]) were reflected in other types of films far more popular than those canonised as *noir*. Both scholars cite the influence (but juxtaposing nature) of early film criticism, specifically that of John Houseman and Lester Asheim in the late 1940s, which was even at that early stage questioning the representativeness of Hollywood's new features – those which film criticism has retrospectively designated as 'classic' *film noir*. In Houseman's opinion, early examples of these 'darker' films and their themes were 'no lurid invention' by Hollywood, but 'a fairly accurate reflection of the neurotic personality of […] America in the year 1947'. [147] This is the critical vantage point which has since endured in successive film and cultural criticism, rather than counterpoints like Asheim's; which argued that, firstly, these films were not the most popular 'genre' in Hollywood in the 1940s, and secondly, Houseman's choice of films was too selective to be representative of any kind of 'zeitgeist'.[148]

Yet the 'zeitgeist theory of film as cultural history'[149] persists in film scholarship, and to this day work on this film type is usually prefaced with an exploration of the particular socio-political (or economic) climate in which it originally emerged; and, more often than not, the observation of historical forces which seem to support themes such as 'wartime mobilisation of women and men, with its subsequent disruption of gender roles, and post-war cultural readjustments'.[150] A consequence of this, as Hanson notes, is that 'questions

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[145] Mike Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 2.

[146] Chopra-Gant's book in particular is intended to explore the other, far more popular Hollywood films and genres in this period, which explored similar themes to that which are so often attributed to *film noir,* but also expressed optimism, not just pessimism, suggesting that 'there is compelling evidence that the reality of postwar American was more equivocal' than a study just of *film noir* has led critics to assume. See ibid, 4.

[147] John Houseman, 'Today's Hero: A Review', *Hollywood Quarterly II,* 1 (1947), 161-163, cited in Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres*, 2. Houseman's opinions to this effect are also cited by Hanson in *Hollywood Heroines,* 2.

[148] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines,* 4-5; Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres*, 2-3.

[149] Richard Maltby, '"Film Noir": The Politics of the Maladjusted Text', *Journal of American Studies*, 18.1 (1992), 56.

[150] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, 2.

of *noir*'s gender relations' have formed 'a central focus' of scholarship in which context is 'the terms of *noir*'s purchase'.[151]

For example, Angela Martin argues that the end of the Second World War – like the aftermath of the First World War and the Vietnam War – 'threw up enormous problems for the men returning and those they were returning to', one of the symptoms being an 'unusually high divorce rate',[152] in opposition to the statistics cited by historians like Campbell. Much like McNamara's narrative, Martin suggests that the new experiences of 'the American woman' created a climate (or a particular popular opinion of such a climate) in which she was no longer compatible with the American man.[153] Gaylyn Studlar suggests that not only is the representation of men – and unavoidably, their post-war positions – a crucial element to the early establishment of '*film noir*', but that these early examples 'vividly represent […] the mental vulnerability of men,' who are trying (often failing) to reintegrate into society, and must experience a certain level of *internal*, as well as possibly external conflict.[154] Similarly, Sylvia Harvey, in trying to understand 'the process whereby the depiction of women in these films, by a complex and circuitous network of mediation, reflects such social changes as the increasing entry of women into the labor market', argues that 'it is in the representation of the institution of the family […] that in film noir serves as the vehicle for the expression of frustration'.[155] Evidently also subscribing to a 'zeitgeist' vision of *film noir*, Harvey argues that much of what the original films' themes reflect, therefore, is 'an indirect response to this forcible assault on traditional family structures and the traditional and conservative values which they embody.'[156] While all of these issues are suggestive of the 'conflicting interest, illusions and disillusions'[157] in American society in and around 1944, they are therefore well-worn assessments of this period that seemingly perpetuate a dubiously-representative 'zeitgeist' view of American

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151 Ibid.

152 Angela Martin, "'Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!": The Central Women of 40s Films Noirs', in *Women in Film Noir,* E. Ann Kaplan, ed., 2nd edn, (London: BFI, 1998), 203.

153 Martin, 'The Central women of 40s Films Noirs', 203. Citing Ralph Willett, 'The Nation in Crisis', in *Cinema, Politics and Society in America*, Phillip Davies and Brian Neve, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), 64; Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Avon Books, 1974).

154 Gaylyn Studlar, '"The Corpse on Reprieve": Film Noir's Cautionary Tales of "Tough Guy" Masculinity', in Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson, eds., *A Companion to Film Noir*, 1st edn., (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 373.

155 Sylvia Harvey, 'Woman's Place: the absent family of film noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed., E. Ann Kaplan, 1st edn., (London: BFI, 1980), 23.

156 Ibid., 25.

157 Martin, "'Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!'", 203.

history, in which society was apparently primed for the *film noir* to appear as a reflector of social/gender tension.

It is unsurprising then, that in trying to appear faithfully representative of 1947, of America's post-war society, and concerned with the experience of returning veterans, McNamara would use this kind of 'zeitgeist' sentiment to authenticate the game during promotional interviews. Even less surprising is the fact that *LAN* allows players to play through these very issues, constructing them as symbolic, representative, and therefore authentic of this place and time. A reductionist view of *noir*ish women are a key trope mobilised to tell such a narrative, and the Black Dahlia is *LAN*'s cornerstone for doing so.

The Black Dahlia and the 'Homicide' cases: A 'sad story' of post-war womanhood

Though there are representations of other women in the minor characters littered through the game's narrative, it is fitting that from the outset, as one of the five major sections of the game, *LAN*'s Homicide cases seek to historicise their own fictions by tapping into this zeitgeist, both in terms of ostensible historical context and the game's own narrative content. To do so, a significant portion of the narrative deals with the fatal consequences of women's movement *outside* of the home and the traditional family structure. This section of the game begins with Phelps's promotion to Homicide, after players have completed a certain amount of previous cases. The very first case that Phelps/the player is given, and the recurring theme of these interlinked cases overall, is a potential connection to the murder of Elizabeth Short, coined as the 'Black Dahlia' or 'The Werewolf' case by the contemporary press.[158]

The choice of this historic, infamously unsolved murder case as the substance on which to base a significant proportion of *LAN*'s narrative is only one instance of many in which the murder of Elizabeth Short has been 'reported, retold, and reinvestigated hundreds of times in popular media, from true-crime journalism, books, and television

[158] It is perhaps of note that the game, through its character dialogues, takes pains to not only use the arguably better-known 'Black Dahlia' designation for this case, but also makes reference to 'The Werewolf' killer. During 'The Red Lipstick Murder', while driving to the first crime scene, Phelps expresses confusion about the use of 'The Werewolf Killer' designation. His new partner Rusty Galloway enlightens him: 'The Daily News came out calling him The Werewolf Killer, The Examiner came up with The Black Dahlia.' Perhaps the intention in including this supposedly historically accurate, though more obscure 'historical fact' is another way in which the game attempts to attain a more 'faithful' sense of its historical setting.

features, to dramatised and fictionalised accounts in fiction, film, and TV'.[159] Though the Black Dahlia case has been moulded into many narrative forms,

> As the violated, defiled, mutilated woman, she suggests a deeper cultural interpretation: by-product of the misogyny resulting from the power and independence women were gaining in the war years. The Black Dahlia murder can be read in cultural terms as the consequence of male rage against the war-liberated woman, the attempt of the male to leave his mark on the woman, to reclaim her as his property and reassert his power.[160]

In that sense, Fine notes, the case often 'offers a clear instance of the historic event rendered by the novelist [or other creator] as symbolic event.'[161] It seems to matter little that the 'defiled woman' was present in literary '*noir*' well before the war – for example, in Chandler's *The Big Sleep,* published in 1939 – and some of the most prominent classic *noirs* were released before Short's death. That is, 'sexual apprehension and the consequent revenge against women' have been mainstay themes of 'noir resurrections' since *Chinatown*.[162]

Katherine Farrimond has argued that it is

> more productive to consider the Black Dahlia case in terms of its cultural presence as a form of spectral myth that permeates contemporary understandings of classic-era Hollywood and in terms of how the case speaks to the way in which visual culture is compulsively drawn and re-drawn to the juncture of sex and death and embodied by Short.[163]

Farrimond argues that the very 'date and location of her murder — Los Angeles, 1947', is thus actually an 'ideal geographic and temporal location for later [popular culture] texts to cast a dark but nostalgic glance back at the combination of beautiful women, death, classical Hollywood cinema, and the mid-century urban landscape offered up in film noir and apparently crystallised in the Black Dahlia case'.[164] *LAN* is clearly no exception in terms of historical (and cinematic) capitalization on the symbolic usefulness of Short's death.

Indeed, this is the end to which inclusion of this 'historic' true-crime case *LAN* pursues. Mention of the ongoing investigation of Short's murder appears as early in the

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159 Farrimond, 'Postfeminist Noir', 34.
160 Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 212.
161 Ibid., 210.
162 Ibid., 213.
163 Farrimond, 'Postfeminist Noir', 34.
164 Ibid., 35.

game as the 'Slip of the Tongue' Traffic desk case, where Phelps and partner Stefan Bekowsky discuss the police's progress on the way to the first crime scene location. When Phelps is promoted to the Homicide after Traffic, players must examine different dead women's bodies at each case's initial crime scene location (*figure 18*). The only way to do this is through gameplay animations in which Phelps physically straddles their body, which occupies most of the screen (*figure. 19*). Players can remain in this position and view the women this way for as long as they wish, while directing Phelps's hands to manipulate their head and arms, and gaze across the woman's torso for evidence as to possible cause of death and motive, and to advance the case/game progression. The woman's dead body is marked on the location's mini map as one of the many 'clues' to be discovered and collected at the crime scene, and becomes one of the micro 'puzzles' that the player must interact with and solve from case to case.[165]

Figure 18: Cutscene: pan over the body of Celine Henry, the first murder victim ('The Red Lipstick Murder')

[165] Steenberg also argues that, in the context of television, this kind of 'tabloid forensic' investigation is heavily gendered. See Steenberg, *Forensic Science*.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 19. Phelps examining the body of Celine Henry ('The Red Lipstick Murder').

As with a number of Rockstar titles, *LAN* features in Anita Sarkeesian's 2014 'Tropes vs Women' video essay series as a game that features 'Women as Background Decorations', a character trope defined as:

> The subset of largely insignificant non-playable female characters whose sexuality or victimhood is exploited as a way to infuse edgy, gritty or racy flavoring into game worlds. These sexually objectified female bodies are designed to function as environmental texture while titillating presumed straight male players […] Sexualised female bodies often occupy a dual role as both sexual playthings, and as the perpetual victims of male violence.[166]

While it is perhaps not unusual for women in the so-called 'classic suspense narrative' of *noir*-like films ('texts informed by patriarchal categories of sexual difference'[167]) to be seen 'through the man's fantasmic, paranoiac projections', and that it was very often 'the body of the woman' which 'constitutes the center around which the investigation pivots',[168] in *LAN* it is the *dead* body of these women which represents the site of investigation. Rather than the relative control that might have been held by a *femme fatale* whose mystery and potentially duplicitous persona was what the male hero would investigate and try to

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166 Anita Sarkeesian, "Women as Background Decoration: Part 2 - Tropes vs Women in Video Games", *FeministFrequency*, 25 August 2014, https://feministfrequency.com/video/women-as-background-decoration-part-2/ [accessed 1 October 2016].
167 Amelia Jones, "'She Was Bad News'": Male Paranoia and the Contemporary New Woman", *Camera Obscura,* 25-26 (1991), 300.
168 Ibid.

overcome, these women are in no position of power or control whatsoever. The women who form the centre of the homicide cases are subsequently known only through the player's 'physical' manipulation of their dead bodies,[169] and by the way those who knew them discuss them.

This has a particular consequence for developing a historical narrative about 'social tension' and men and women's post-war relationship. While investigating the cases and interviewing the victims' husbands, the murders are repeatedly linked to these post-war 'tensions', and how the women's behaviour adversely affects their ability to coexist with the male counterparts. The first female victim, Celine Henry, is a fictionalised allegory for the real-life murder of Jeanne French. The 'flying nurse' whose death was similarly linked to the Black Dahlia murder,[170] one of the *Newswire* posts dedicated to the true crime behind the case describes it as a 'tragic story' which provided 'very specific kernels of inspiration' for the markings found on Henry's naked body.[171] Like French, Henry is discovered posed naked with various words written in lipstick on her body ('Fuck' 'B.D.', 'Tex'), at a well-known 'lover's lane' location (*figure. 20*).

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 20. Investigating the body of Celine Henry, marked with 'B.D.' in red lipstick ('The Red Lipstick Murder').

[169] The first three victims are found naked, and the second two clothed with the lower half of their body partially exposed.
[170] Hadley Meares, 'In 1947, a Month After the Black Dahlia, the "Lipstick Murder" Shocked L.A.', *LA Weekly*, 4 January 2017, http://www.laweekly.com/arts/in-1947-a-month-after-the-black-dahlia-the-lipstick-murder-shocked-la-7759115 [accessed 9 August 2018].
[171] '"The Red Lipstick Murder": Real Crime Stories of 1947 Los Angeles That Inspired L.A. Noire Cases', *Rockstar Newswire*, 11 March 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/14351/the-red-lipstick-murder-real-crime-stories-of-1947-los-angeles-t.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

Her personal effects at the location lead the player/Phelps back to a bar that she frequents, in order to learn her name from the owner of the bar. During questioning, the bar owner divulges that Celine often attracts the attention of, and leaves with, a number of different men. After gaining this information and attending her home, it becomes clear from inspecting the scene and finding a photograph that she was a former pilot, but is now an alcoholic. While interviewing her husband Jacob (a former corpsman), one strand of questioning will lead him to talk about his wife as 'one of the first woman pilots' who 'hung out with movie stars and royalty'. Tensions arise, therefore, because her experiences of wartime work have changed her, insomuch as 'she never wanted to come down from the clouds'.[172] Jacob reveals that after the war she had 'settled' with/for him, 'a mechanic who put a roof over her head', but it 'was never going to be enough'. Choosing to interview a neighbour reveals the couple's 'marital problems', including the fact that Jacob's physically assaulted his wife the night she died. Concurrently, the owner of the bar states that Celine's husband put up with 'a lot of shit'. Jacob himself tells the player/Phelps directly that he was 'sick to death of her', her incessant drinking and promiscuity, and was trying to have her committed to an asylum.

Celine Henry is portrayed as a woman who had not only done an atypical job (that she was unwilling to give up), but who drinks to excess and sleeps around. Her extramarital existence as a promiscuous woman outside of the home is not simply a cause of frustration and anger to her honest, hard-working husband, who has been rendered 'unglamorous' and unnecessary in a post-war climate of supposedly newly-won freedom for women. It is also implied as the direct cause of her death: she is murdered after a night of heavy drinking at the bar, and the 'correct' person that players must charge with the crime to score a perfect performance ranking is her lover. Rusty Galloway tells Jacob that he understands his resorting to violence: 'In your shoes, I would have done exactly the same thing'. Even Phelps, though seemingly unconvinced of these justifications for murder throughout the case, will try and get Jacob to confess during interrogation by goading him:

> Phelps: You stomped her because she's a drunken whore and she treated you like shit, you stomped her for all the years you had to take it. You stomped her because you are such a weak fucking sister, Jacob, and you wanted to erase all memory of it. Go on. Try to deny it.[173]

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[172] Jacob Henry will tell Phelps this in the final interrogation sequence after being charged for his wife's murder.

[173] Line of dialogue spoken while interrogating Jacob Henry at the police station, at the close of the mission.

Following from this, each of the Homicide cases continue to present women who have acted in ways to suggest they are responsible for their own deaths. The women are from a mixture of social circumstances: white working women and housewives, and a young battered Latina woman. In most of the Homicide cases, opening cutscenes show the women as drunk, and/or alone and vulnerable in the city. Various bars are recurring locations where players trace the victims' last steps and interactions, usually followed by their homes. In this way, their deaths are suggested as a specific consequence of being *outside* of the home. Most of them are therefore depicted either as alcoholics whose associations with men lead them into trouble, or otherwise troublesome, promiscuous women who have gone out to 'get tight', leaving their children and husbands at home, or trying to leave or divorce them. Moreover, before the connection to Short's murder is revealed, it initially appears that the women have been killed by scorned or emasculated men, and thus the 'victims of male crime'.[174] These tend to be random 'perverts' or violent ex-servicemen. One had been previously discharged for 'beating some poor woman near to death', and another suspect is unstable, homeless sexual predator, living in a Communist 'hobo camp'.[175] The coroner explains there is evidence that the women have been sexually abused by the killer. One of the victims, though found still partially clothed, was violated after her death by a sex offender who found her corpse; who claims there's 'nothing illegal' about kissing a dead body.[176]

In more than one of the cases however, the justification for male rage and battery of their wives goes beyond simply the woman's drunken or promiscuous behaviour, taking on a starkly racialised dimension. Investigating the murder of Theresa Taraldsen in 'The White Shoe Slaying', Galloway uses racial profiling to claim another husband has murdered his wife: 'Just you wait. Nordic types show a particular disposition for this stuff.' While he encourages Galloway to 'not let your assumptions colour [your] detective work', Phelps is no more innocent of racial profiling. In 'The Silk Stocking Murder', the victim is at first described as a 'Hispanic woman', Antonia Maldonado. Her last known location was at the El Dorado Bar, where the bartender states many young Latinas go to drink and complain about their husbands or boyfriends ('It's a story you get used to working the bar'). Until a certain point in the progression of the case, the investigation is structured in such a way that Phelps/the player is led to believe Antonia was murdered

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[174] Gledhill, '*Klute* 1', 28.
[175] From mission 'The White Shoe Slaying'.
[176] From mission 'The Studio Secretary Murder'.

by her husband, Angel Maldonado, from whom she was seeking a divorce. While driving to Angel's residence to question him, Phelps offers a motive for Angel to have killed his wife that is determined specifically by his ethnicity, which Galloway wholeheartedly endorses: 'But Angel, he's a young Latino man, it would hurt his sense of who he is, he would see himself as a failure, a woman taking control over his life?'.[177] Angel's 'Latin pride' is offered as a believable motive for murder, and his 'cruel', jealous[178] nature is presented as linked to his ethnicity, if only because he is one of the few Latino men in the game whose character is constructed, and subsequently explored and interrogated. Likewise, Antonia's grievance with her husband is grouped together as one of numerous examples of Latina women being unhappy with their treatment at the hands of their men, with no other examples of Latino/as behaving in a way that isn't antagonistic to each other.

It is worth noting that while racial stereotypes underpin the investigatory mechanics of this case, opportunities are missed to connect the experience and existence of Latin Americans in the game's post-war fiction to actual historical events in which they featured prominently. For example, events such as the Sleepy Lagoon trial (1942) and the following Zoot Suit Riots (1943) have been read as symptomatic of growing white racism in the early 1940s.[179] Moreover, there is precedence for historicising *noir* fictions by way of these events: like the 'Black Dahlia' murder, the Riots have long been used in Los Angeles fiction as a means by which to address the period's underlying racial tensions.[180] How Team Bondi and Rockstar have chosen to characterise, and yet not meaningfully-*historicise* the experiences of Latin Americans, should tell us something of how the depoliticised, white-centric narrative of the game is ultimately privileged.

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[177] From mission 'The Silk Stocking Murder'.

[178] One of the reasons the player is led toward a new potential suspect is because, during interrogation, Angel points out that some 'creep' at the fruit market they used to frequent was 'always running his eyes all over my wife'. From mission 'The Silk Stocking Murder'.

[179] While the riots themselves are namechecked in one of the many optional street crimes players can investigate while free-roaming the city, even then, the events of the mini-mission little-resemble the actualities of the historical event, where members of the U.S. military attacked Mexican American youths because of how they were dressed. Richard Griswold del Castillo, 'The Los Angeles "Zoot Suit Riots" Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives', *Mexican Studies* 16, no. 2 (2000): 367. Revising this moment of racial tension, removing this key historical detail from it, turns this reference into moment of shallow historical gesturing, adding historicised colour to the game's landscape, gesturing to an awareness of wider historical events without adequately dealing with what they meant to people other than white Americans.

[180] For example, David Fine writes that 'The Sleepy Lagoon murder and the Zoot Suit Riots provided the novelist Thomas Sánchez *in Zoot-Suit Murders* (1978) and the playwright Luis Valdez in *Zoot Suit* (1978) narrative angles to look back on the hysterical, inflammatory war years of the city, when racism directed at Mexican Americans was intensified'. See Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 210.

What is more problematic about all of these cases and the narratives of post-war gender relations they construct through player interaction – and some of their troubling racialised components – is the fact that none of the men who are suspected or charged in these cases actually turn out to be guilty of the women's murders. The 'real' killer responsible for all of the murders is revealed in the final Homicide case as the same man who (in this historical fiction) killed Elizabeth Short. He is the half-brother of an unnamed politician, and so the case (and his death at Phelps's/the player's hands in the mission 'The Quarter Moon Murders') gets covered up. Players must investigate a number of cases, and make a number of 'cerebral' choices based on the way these micro narratives play out – choices that are explicitly coded as 'correct' and 'incorrect', and which affect the outcome of the player's performance, and therefore motives for murders that seem reasonable enough for a player to assume guilt. Indulging in a 'zeitgeist' view of this period in post-war history to construct them, these motivations for the violent abuse and murder of young women are never truly contradicted. They are unresolved, left to stand, in all of their reductive, stereotypical, or even racist nature.

More particularly, these motives are legitimised as plausible by Phelps's Homicide partner, Rusty Galloway. While driving between crime scenes and other locations, players are forced to listen to various instances of dialogue between Phelps and his partners. These interactions cannot be skipped, even if players choose the option to let their partner drive the car to the next location: the journey will only skip to the next cutscene once all of the predetermined lines of dialogue between the two men in the car has been spoken, despite players having submitted control to the game's AI. During these conversations, Galloway explicitly connects the murder of a high number of women to the experience of men retuning back from the war, but which are made to appear understandable within this very particular socio-historic context:

> Phelps: Why so many women this year?
>
> Galloway: 'Cause of the war. You should know that. Guy gets to kill people every day in combat, comes home, and he's expected to take lip service from his wife? What do you think is gonna happen?
>
> Phelps: It's that simple?
>
> Galloway: Like I said – most of the time it is.[181]

[181] From mission 'The Red Lipstick Murder'.

As in most Rockstar titles, these snippets of dialogue give players a sense of the context in which they are performing the specific (repetitive) gameplay actions required to complete given objectives. Therefore, this very early interaction serves as a kind of explanation or justification for the ensuing five cases and their source materials, and players' subsequent interaction with them as part of the wider *noir* story; providing a layer of 'framing narrative'[182] that places them within their specific historical context. Normalising the psychopathy of the returning veteran, and/or the difficulty men faced in reintegrating into society – perpetuated by the 'zeitgeist' thematic of *film noir* criticism[183] – these snippets of historicising dialogue further work to place blame on the victims for their death.

Also troubling is the way in which Rusty appears in many of the conversations in this case and later to *understand* that men are acting as any man would, if he had to 'take lip service' from a woman. Though Phelps usually remains neutral or chastises him, Rusty often expresses this as his opinion in a number of colourful ways:

> Galloway: For my money, the broad keeps the house looking like that, she probably deserved [being murdered].[184]
>
> Galloway: If one of my ex's drank like this, she'd be feeling the back of my hand.[185]
>
> Phelps: You shouldn't make disparaging comments about her without even the slightest inkling of what she was like.
>
> Galloway: She was a woman, wasn't she? Around my third divorce I realised women might not be the pure angels we imagine.[186]

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[182] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 156–58 Gish, 'Playing the Second World War.'
[183] This is further normalised by the fact that a number of veterans are now homeless men with clear mental health problems; for example, in 'The White Shoe Slaying'.
[184] From mission 'The Red Lipstick Murder.'
[185] Ibid.
[186] From mission 'The Golden Butterfly.'

> Galloway: Always blame the husband. Nine times out of ten it's the closest person to the vic that does the deed. God knows I've wanted to kill some wives in my day.[187]

In some instances, going beyond just expressing that these women deserve what they get, Rusty often seems to instruct Phelps that cases like this are actually run of the mill in 1940s Los Angeles, and are just one of those things to be expected:

> Phelps: You don't think it's strange that all these murders are happening to girls who've been out drinking?
> Galloway: No, no. A broad drinks, she gets a bit tight, she starts mouthing off. This leads to that, and she ends up in an alleyway. It's a sad story but this town has seen it play out a thousand times Cole.[188]

> Galloway: Every prom queen from every fucking hick town in American turns up here. Where do they end up? Gutted on the fucking sidewalk.[189]

Characters like Galloway especially (in his capacity as Phelps/the player's partner) seem to frequently express sentiments which are sympathetic to the grievances of the accused men, communicating that their actions – had they actually committed them – would be *understandable,* despite being unlawful. Moreover, through prescribed dialogue segments such as these, what players are allowed to see and do, and the way they interact with other characters (dead or alive) is normalised as the sort of things that you'd expect to see and do in this historic space and time. It draws directly from the kind of commonplace, popularised view of post-war America and women's existence within it that other 'postfeminist' neo-*noir* cultural products validate, especially the connections between early-Hollywood glamour, beautiful young would-be-starlets desperate for the limelight, and their 'tragic', often violent deaths as a result of their 'big aspirations'.[190]

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[187] From mission 'The Golden Butterfly.'
[188] From mission 'The Silk Stocking Murder'.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Farrimond, 'Postfeminist Noir', 35. See Farrimond's article more generally for fuller exploration of the ways in which popular culture has used the narrative of the Elizabeth Short murder, with a focus on De Palma's recreation of it, to sustain 'a very specific mythology about tragic starlets and the pitfalls of

The Black Dahlia (2006) is a particularly noteworthy example of this, and direct links between the film and *LAN* can easily be made. In the film, Madeline Linscott (Hillary Swank) makes similar remarks about how people come from 'hick towns' to Hollywood. The poor construction of housing stock from old film sets creating 'firetraps' all over Los Angeles is replicated in a direct line of inquiry on *LAN*'s Arson desk cases. More specifically to women, victim-blaming runs rife through the film, whereby Elizabeth Short is called a 'tramp', demonised for her promiscuity, and branded a compulsive liar by people who knew her. The stereotype of masses of starry-eyed young women coming to Hollywood 'to break into the movies' are equally derided: just women from 'hick towns' seeking a new life. Further still, the mutilated corpses in *LAN* – as in the body of Celine Henry having a 'BD' scrawled in lipstick (*figure 20*) – resembles Kay Lake's (Scarlet Johansson) similar 'BD' carved into her back. Though the film is dismissed as less 'superior' to *True Confessions* in 'Rockstar Recommends',[191] it appears to actively serve as a core historiographical source for the game's depiction of and engagement with the past. This film, and other neo-*noirs*, appears to serve at least as much of a source as the 'real' murder of army nurse Jean French. It is history filtered through the prism of popularised, sensationalised re-renderings of the case, dependent on the circulation of certain symbols and fragments of the past through popular culture, which become crystallised around fallacies and ideas of 'zeitgeists' that are wholly unrepresentative; for example 'The violated and mutilated woman' which 'is almost a leitmotiv in recent fiction and film,'[192] and video games should not be excluded from this assessment.

The graphic nature of women's presentation in the game – and the way their violated, exposed bodies become the objects of the player's investigation – evidently draws its inspiration from, and attempts to create authenticity because of this pervasive cultural trope. But there is a more direct attempt at paratextually justifying the way these women's bodies are constructed and displayed as a gameplay device. In *The Telegraph's* 'developer interview', the interviewer Nick Cowen directly asks McNamara and Barrera about the 'pretty heavy subject matter – race, sex, police brutality – that you could use to

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Hollywood', and the implications of the use of 'real' historical evidence to support such fictionalised, mythologised narratives.

[191] 'Rockstar Recommends: "True Confessions"', *Rockstar Newswire*, 5 August 2011, http://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/18381/rockstar-recommends-true-confessions.html [accessed 10 March 2016].

[192] Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 213.

inform the plot…'.[193] How McNamara and Barrera choose to respond to this is particularly instructive:

> [Barrera]: Oh yeah, if you read anything from that time period – news articles or crime scene photography – it's incredibly gruesome. I think that a lot of people have a very rosy view of the past during that period but it wasn't like that at all. It was very dirty…
>
> [McNamara]: Definitely. When we were doing the research for the game it was an eye-opener. Back in those days you could literally have a picture on the front page of the newspaper of a woman who had been cut in half. There was a level of brutality that was accepted in that age; people had got used to it during the Second World War and that allowed for that sort of editorial judgement in a paper, which over time changed. You would never see something like that now. Plus newspapers were coming out three or four times a day at that time and they weren't just news, they were a sort of entertainment back then too.[194]

In both foregrounding their 'research' and thus authority as historian, McNamara claims a kind of 'realism' and historical accuracy for the game, by comparing the graphic nature of its depiction of murdered women to actual journalism in the 1940s. 'Back in those days', public displays of brutality were the norm, and thereby to make *LAN* authentic it must be just as brutal in kind. It rings true of similar attempts in the promotion of *RDR* to claim authenticity for a vision of the American west that is also brutal, and thus more real that 'romanticisations' or 'rosy views' of what life was like 'back then'.

Indeed, what is also troubling about his claims is McNamara's likening of this phenomenon to a kind of 'entertainment', as if to further justify the inclusion of these things in what is, ostensibly, 'a game'. These comments seem to suggest that if it was the norm for this to function as a kind of gruesome entertainment 'back then', why not now, to portray this period in the correct way? Whether or not it was the norm to find a woman 'cut in half' on the front of a newspaper is not the point, however. Rather, this is another example of what Shaw refers to as 'the tyranny of realism': how claims of 'accuracy' or 'authenticity' constructed paratextually in promotional rhetoric can work to gloss over serious, complicated, and ultimately 'insidious ideological arguments' about the past.[195] The problematic nature of using the exposed, brutalised bodies of women in this game

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[193] Cowen, '*L.A. Noire* Developer Interview'.
[194] Quoted in ibid.
[195] Shaw, 'The Tyranny of Realism'.

are elided by the fact that it is presented to players – before they even have the chance to play the game and decide for themselves – as normative, 'accurate', and realistic. Contained within the wider context of a game narrative that is inherently hostile to women, with male characters that are outright, unapologetically misogynistic like Galloway further troubles this representation of women.

But these issues are not confined to the appearance of women in *LAN* wherein they are directly connected to the death of Elizabeth Short. These themes and characterisations of women are put in place, in terms of gameplay progression, before players even encounter the Homicide cases. The game's attitude to women in late-40s Los Angeles more generally is largely pernicious, and female characters largely conform to several interconnected, stereotypical roles. They are depicted as scheming and manipulative gold-diggers with murderous intentions, who pay for their treachery with their lives ('A Marriage Made in Heaven'), the tragic and harassed wives of scoundrels and adulterers ('The Driver's Seat'), or variations thereof. That is, most women exist somewhere within the continuum of the stereotypical *noir* vice/virtue polarity. But where women feature as plot points or witnesses to be investigated and interrogated in cases other than the Homicide Desk, the blaming of women for the bad things that happen to them runs equally as consistently.

The game also seems overly-preoccupied with referencing or depicting paedophilic 'kiddie rapers', 'perverts', or men with a taste for violent sexual assault of women and minors. In the final Traffic desk case 'The Fallen Idol', Phelps and Bekowsky investigate the attempted murder of a former star, June Ballard, and the fifteen-year-old Jessica Hamilton whom she is 'helping' to break into the movie business. Over the course of the investigation it is revealed that Ballard – portrayed as a cold, manipulative, and fame-hungry mob wife – has taken Jessica to an audition with a film producer, Mike Bishop, allowing her to be drugged and sexually abused in order to secure herself a role in his upcoming film project. Though one of the pieces of evidence players uncover is the teenager's torn underwear, and a medical report detailing that she has been sexually assaulted, Jessica is portrayed as a runaway from her rural (hick town) home, 'desperate' to break into the movies. Ballard instructed her to 'toughen up' and accept what happened to her as the 'price of stardom'. Bishop's accomplice Marlon Hopgood – who runs a seedy 'casting-couch' set up out of his prop workshop, tells Phelps/the player that hundreds of underage girls are abused by film producers: 'It's the price they're willing to pay. None of them will press charges.' Bishop's wife, Gloria, tells Phelps/the player that

she knows her husband 'likes them young', that she herself met him when she was sixteen, taken in by his 'genius'. To her, 'this is Hollywood', there's always 'a deal to be done', and these sorts of things are run of the mill. These isolated narratives serve little purpose other than to advance Phelps's position within the LAPD and add to the '*noir*' atmosphere of the game.[196] Yet this atmosphere implicitly normalises an environment of hostility and outright sexual brutality against women and young girls.[197]

The final appearance of a dead woman in *LAN*'s cases is while the player/Phelps is working on the Vice desk, investigating a stolen shipment of army surplus morphine which has found its way onto the streets, resulting in a number of deaths. It is in this mission where the historicised sight of dead women and the cinematic, *film noir* presentation of female characters appear to converge most vividly and complicate. The case can be played after the purchase of extra DLC, and is called 'The Naked City', a deliberate reworking of the 1948 film of the same name. In it, a twenty-nine-year-old fashion model is found in the bath. She has been murdered, but the killer has tried to cover up the death as morphine overdose. Galloway and Phelps's Vice partner Roy Earle both express the opinion that she has killed herself because she was 'having trouble with some boys', a view which is shared by the woman's housekeeper. It is revealed that her death, however, *is* actually the result of 'trouble with some boys'. She was having an affair with her doctor, who was supplying her with Benzedrine in aid of her modelling career (like 'a lot of young women in her line of work'). She is also complicit in a number of burglaries of society homes; her accomplices and lovers portray her as desperate for more money, no matter how much they made. This case, like the Homicide cases the player investigates with Galloway, are similarly accompanied by a rhetoric of misogyny and victim-blaming, this time from Earle, who makes it clear that he likes women in their proper place. Moreover, finding certain key pieces of evidence in the case unlocks its own

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[196] Middle-age men having sex with young girls is also a feature of the mission 'A Polite Invitation'. While players control Jack Kelso, they must interrogate Curtis Benson, the Vice President of California Fire and Life Insurance. Upon searching his apartment, he finds a twelve-year-old girl in Bensons' bed. She is reluctant to leave – grateful for the 'nice things' Benson buys her. When Kelso tells her to get out, Benson tells him 'She will only come back'. On the one hand, this small part of the narrative is again suggestive of an environment that is inherently hostile to young girls, who for the most part, bring this on themselves or are willing participants. However, this vignette has no bearing on or consequence for the player's investigation; a narrative flourish intended only to add further colour to the game's *noir* atmosphere.

[197] It is perhaps worth noting that in none of these scenarios do the (solely male) paedophiles target young boys. Indeed, the only children in the game are female. Phelps has two girls, though they are rarely shown or mentioned. Captain Donnelly also has an unspecified number of young female children, and he with lament their safety, and his ill-ease at sending them to school in a town filled with predatory men, if the player messes up the interrogation of a predatory, homeless war veteran during 'The White Shoe Slaying'.

achievement, 'A good looking corpse'. It rewards the player for participating in the consideration, investigation, and implicit sexualisation of her dead body.

The conceit of women desperate for success in Hollywood – particular to the characterisation of Elizabeth Short as much as to women in *LAN* – is thus threaded through almost all of women's appearances outside of the Homicide cases. Even minor female characters who only serve the narrative insofar as they are the initial witnesses to a crime are portrayed as superficial and naïve, willing to withhold evidence from the police and sell it to the papers, to help them break into the industry.[198] More often than not, it is suggested that they simply bring these things on themselves: as Bekowsky remarks after the player interviews the sexually-abused Jessica Hamilton in her hospital bed, 'It's the tale of this town Cole. Lambs that go willingly to the slaughter.'[199]

Players are told, again and again, that this is all normative: Los Angeles – or more particularly, the Hollywood system – was an environment inherently hostile to women, who were largely either washed-up, former-star wives of producers, or wannabe actresses. Only in one instance is a woman shown to be working within the Hollywood studio system,[200] but as the last in a line of Black Dahlia connected murders, her life and work is almost entirely unremarked on. She is merely an alcoholic, broken women sleeping rough.

While these reductionist, stereotypical characterisations of women fit the popular, *noir*-tinged pattern of what this period was 'really like', based largely on the seemingly-representative example of Elizabeth Short, none of this actually reflects the realities of women's lives in American post-war society. Nor is it reflective of women's experiences and work in Hollywood in the period; especially within the studio system itself. What has frequently been overlooked is both the increasing involvement of women in the film industry behind the camera. As Smyth's recent historical project to uncover the women who 'ran Hollywood' shows, through the 1930s and 40s Hollywood had offered women far more than 'the typical role of the screen-struck girl who wanted to be the next Carole Lombard.'[201] Women worked as screenwriters, editors, producers, designers, agents, were

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[198] As in the minor character of Shannon Perry who players must interview at the outset of 'A Marriage Made in Heaven'.

[199] From mission 'The Fallen Idol'. A similar sentiment is expressed by Roy Earle, Phelps' Vice partner, in the mission 'The Black Caesar': 'As long as Hollywood exists it's gonna be chewing up starry-eyed little girls.'

[200] The victim, Evelyn Summers, in the case 'The Studio Secretary Murder'. When finding her make-shift bed in a liquor store, the store owner will tell Phelps that she 'used to work in legal copyrights'. This appears to be all that is known about her, and her role within a studio isn't a feature of the case, other than in the 'clues' that can be discovered; personal effects form her former job. The character seems to have been based on another actual murder that was connected to the Black Dahlia case, Evelyn Winters. See Meares, 'In 1947, a Month After the Black Dahlia, the "Lipstick Murder" Shocked L.A.'.

[201] Smyth, *Nobody's Girl Friday*, 10.

founding members of major guilds and unions, and held executive positions in the larger Hollywood studios.[202]

Yet 'the majority of post-1970 academic and popular histories' focused on andocentric auteurist critiques, 'lambasted Hollywood' for its supposedly all-encompassing 'male gaze', and have subsequently 'painted the industry as monolithically male and hell-bent on disempowering women.'[203] These are, Smyth contends, 'inaccurate, pervasive, and damaging myths about Hollywood' that suggest men ran the studios and women 'were supposed to be sexualized objects'.[204] Women were prevalent behind the camera, running major studio departments, not just in front of it, though popular fictions and (largely male) historians have elided their presence from the record. It complicates the long-held feminist film theory notion that women were there 'to be looked at', speaking lines and performing actions written and intended for them only by men.

A substantial number of '*noir*' films were themselves scripted or produced by women,[205] whether these films actually featured female characters as central or not.[206] Hanson, among others,[207] also notes the 'importance' of both 'women workers in Hollywood' and 'female audiences' at the time, in having a tangible impact on '*film noir's* heterogeneity in its treatment of gender.' Women working in the studio system as screenwriters and producers 'made their influence felt on a range of genres, with a particular emphasis on the 'woman's angle' of the crime and mystery genres.'[208] Moreover, Hanson reads women's experience of work, city life, and relative freedom – 'the transformation of women's private and public roles'[209] – reflected in a number of films which revolve around a *female,* rather than the canonically-accepted male investigatory narrative,[210] directly placing her in spaces often categorised as 'the male world' of crime

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202 Ibid.
203 Ibid., 10; 15.
204 Ibid., 10.
205 For example, Virginia Van Upp, Joan Harrison, Elizabeth Reinhardt and Harriet Parsons.
206 For example, Angela Martin compiles detailed lists that denote films that involved female writers, or otherwise had 'central female characters' or followed female-centric themes or perspectives. Interestingly, of all the films explicitly cited as 'recommendations' by Rockstar or which are referenced in the game itself, very few of the 'classic' noirs feature on either of these lists— only *The Big Sleep* (1946) from the former, and *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) from the latter. See Martin, "'Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!": The Central Women of 40s Films Noirs', 222–25; See also Smyth, *Nobody's Girl Friday*; Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*.
207 For example, see Sheri Chinen Biesen, 'Joan Harrison, Virginia Van Upp and Women Behind-the-Scenes in Wartime Film Noir', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 20 (2003): 125–44.
208 Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, 11.
209 Ibid., 30.
210 As examples Hanson cites *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), *The Phantom Lady* (1944), and *The Dark Corner* (1947). See Hanson, 18–20.

and work in genre criticism.[211] That is, Hollywood reflected contemporary '[p]ublic debates about gender identities' and 'new identities for women', and 'drew upon these emergent identities by imagining women in new ways in screen fictions'.[212]

These films in particular 'dealt with the conflict between female desire and the social demands of femininity and/or motherhood, usually in the form of melodrama'.[213] With the rise of women crucial to the war effort, Hollywood mobilised to '[address] itself to this increasingly dominant female audience, in terms of pleasure, but also in terms of the war effort, showing women as workers as well as patriotic, optimistic and supportive wives, mothers and sweethearts.'[214] Moreover, in terms of *film noir* specifically, many were released around and after the end of the war which foregrounded females in lead roles, or even had women's names as their titles.[215]

Yet 'the status [of films with female-centric plots or titles] *vis-à-vis* the "canon" of the film noir cycle/genre fluctuates according to the critic/theorist and his understanding of the term'.[216] Indicative of this gender bias is the fact that that 'thus far it is only male writers who have compiled lists of films noirs'.[217] There thus appears (again, interestingly, as with the case of Western 'canon' scholarship) a kind of 'genre cleansing' that has sought to oftentimes exclude examples of *film noir* with a female appearing as its centre, or at least designate them as merely 'melodramas' or 'women's film[s] as if to keep them in their 'proper' and lesser place': 'films with central female characters constitute perhaps the greatest source of 'misfit' in 'film noir' because they all in some way problematise the conventional film noir discourse in which, as Elizabeth Cowie puts it: 'a particular *masculine* fantasy of sexual difference is played out".[218]

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[211] Ibid., 32.
[212] Ibid., 30.
[213] Martin, 'The Central women of 40s Films Noirs', 202.
[214] Ibid., 203.
[215] *Gilda* (1946), *Laura* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), for example.
[216] Martin, 'The Central Women of 40s Films Noirs', 203.
[217] Ibid., 203. As illustrative examples of this kind of inconsistent canonisation of these various films, Martin cites the various well-known works of John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), Jon Tuska, *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), J. P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,1989), Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style,* 3rd edn. (New York: The Overlook Press, 1980), Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, *Hollywood in the Forties* (New York: Barnes, 1968), McArthur (1972), and Paul Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', who all include (or exclude) a variety of female-centric examples of *film noir* for various reasons, which she here describes.
[218] Martin, "The Central women of 40s Films Noirs", 205, citing Elizabeth Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women', in *Shades of Noir,* Joan Copjec, ed. (London: Verso, 1993), 145 (Martin's emphasis in quotation). Also of note is the fact that women were known to have been the largest movie-going audience at the time, and that there 'was also a conviction in the advertising industry, and Hollywood, that women led purchase decision-making, which included entertainment choices', and thus there were many intricate ways in which the industry produced and marketed their films *to women* who were more likely to control money spent on

The sexism of the *noir* cultural canon is equally pervasive in the promotional discourse of *LAN*, whereby this male-centrism appears in 'Rockstar Recommends' canon too. That so much of these narrative themes in Rockstar's 'recommendations' for *LAN* revolve around the fatalistic male protagonist is noteworthy for the way women are included in the films cited, but more specifically, the manner of their inclusion. In few of these films could it be claimed that women are the focus; nor indeed are their characters or performance the reason given for making the 'recommendation' in the first place. Yet a number of these 'classics' involve the male's 'fateful run in' with, or misfortunate at the hands of evil, manipulative *femme fatale* characters, including *Detour*, *Scarlet Street, The Big Sleep, The Killing*, and *Double Indemnity*. Elsewise, women's function in these films is largely reducible to the trope of the pretty (dead) girl, as in *The Naked City*, *True Confessions*, and an honourable mention to David Lynch's 'noiresque TV series' *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991).[219] Otherwise, women are the sexually or emotionally abused object of the male investigation, as in *Chinatown, L.A. Confidential, Blade Runner*, and *Blue Velvet*; or the woman as 'disturbed', the object of revulsion and horror, as Gloria Swanson's role in *Sunset Boulevard*: reduced to that of a 'Grand Dame Guignol' which 'birthed the "hag horror" genre'.[220]

Women in these films, and the way they are described by Rockstar's paratexts, are positioned in familiar, safe, and clear cut *noir*ish roles. Whether in the films themselves or in Rockstar's summations of their narratives and significance, where women are shown to have any power or effect over the men, they are also shown to be monstrous, manipulative, or reducible to their sexuality in some way. *Noir* is largely packaged and commodified as an overtly male-oriented phenomenon, where women serve the function of plot device in service of the fatalistic male story.

Moreover, similarly '[u]nderrated' in noir scholarship 'is the influence of female authorship on noir, with many popular films of the era developed from the literary works of women,'[221] which is also reflected in the discussion of *LAN's* inspirations in its promotional paratexts. In *The Telegraph's* 'developer interview' with McNamara and Barrera, the former attributes his reasoning for wanting to set a game in this particular historical period because of his interest in film and literature from or about the period –

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going to see them. See for example Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, 8-11; Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997), 196-202.

[219] 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up Part Two - The Neo Noirs'.

[220] 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up - Part One'.

[221] Samantha Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 6.

specifically being 'a huge fan of James Ellroy', and 'a massive fan of Chandler and Hammett.'[222] The fact that McNamara omits their first names in referring to them says something about the canon of 'hardboiled' *noir* literature, and particularly how dominated it is by men like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Thus, as with the inspirations behind *RDR,* little reference is made to narratives and literary material created by women. While Chandler, Hammett, and Ellroy are frequently invoked as shorthand for authentic hardboiled currency, as noted above, female writers following and revising the hardboiled tradition of literature are entirely overlooked.[223]

This is particularly interesting given the way female writers were otherwise used to bolster *LAN*'s paratextual surround, if not inspire the game narrative itself. In May 2011 it was announced via a Take-Two press release that Rockstar had partnered with publishers Little, Brown and Company to release an e-book anthology of crime stories inspired by the game. Michael Pietch of Little, Brown and Company was featured in the press release, extolling the possibilities for 'cross-promotion' this would entail, 'encouraging gamers to read and readers to play games' – something of mutual benefit to both companies.[224] But Sam Houser's quotation noted that the game was inspired as much by literature as the genre's film history, and that Rockstar had thus decided to work 'with the genre's best writers to create stories that lived up to the finest traditions of crime fiction'.[225] This included women crime writers like Megan Abbott (elsewhere known for her work in *noir* fiction and true crime), Joyce Carol Oates, and Francine Prose. Women's 'hardboiled' fiction could therefore form part of *LAN*'s paratextual surround, but not in a process of two-way interaction with the game itself. The stories were *inspired by* the game, not the other way around. Moreover, the promotion of these stories worked to emphasise that characters from the game may appear in the stories, while their themes ran parallel to those found elsewhere in *LAN's* promotion: that they would '[e]xplore the lives of actresses desperate for the Hollywood spotlight; heroes turned defeated men; and classic Noir villains.'[226] Moreover, the cover art for the short stories was stylised to fit in with *LAN's* 'look' – using similar colours, the glamourous, sexualised styling of women,

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[222] Cowen, '*L.A. Noire* Developer Interview'.
[223] For overview, see Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999).
[224] Take-Two Interactive, 'Rockstar Games' Crime Thriller, L.A. Noire, Provides Setting for New Anthology of Short Stories', Press Release, 3 May 2011, *Take-Two Interactive*, http://ir.take2games.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=86428&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1558641 [accessed 27 August 2018].
[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid.

and men as either police detectives, soldiers, or evil villains.[227] Despite appearing to have a symbiotic relationship with the game then, the relationship between them is rather more complicated: the stories – visibly branded as Rockstar products – would not exist without the game, while the game exists without the necessity of anyone accessing the stories.[228] Using the game as inspirations, these stories – while adding to the sense of cultural authenticity surrounding the game – are never allowed to disrupt the story Rockstar and Team Bondi wished to tell, or the world they sought to create. Indeed, these supplementary fictions rather work to support it, via the canonical legitimacy of hardboiled fiction.

Thus, women's writing has long been a part of hardboiled literary culture (past and present), and women's cinema-going and their presence in the workforce (Hollywood studio or otherwise) during, before and after wartime lead to far more complex representations of gender and difference in the cinema of this period, beyond the 'vice-virtue' dichotomy of *femme fatale* and her 'passive, domestic redeemer' opposite, and more complex than most film histories, genre canons, or psychoanalytic textual readings allow for.[229] In Hanson's words, the 'cultural and institutional environment in which Hollywood *noir* was produced and consumed in the 1940s resulted not in a clear generic form, stratified absolutely by gender, but one with multiple influences and, consequently, a complex gendered address.'[230] Women are marginalised perspectives both in *LAN*'s (and wider genre criticism's) canonisation of the *noir*, and the game's presentation of female characters. Yet it is the margins within which, as Hanson notes, '*noir*'s multiple contexts, sources, affiliations, intertexts, influences and characters become evident'; the very contexts which, notably, 'recast questions of *noir*'s "zeitgeist", its gender relations, and particularly its angle on women.'[231]

Not unique to Rockstar however, women's historic involvement in the production of these genres has popularly and critically, by and large, been overlooked in favour of male, authorial 'auteur', and acting currency. It is film and cultural critics, and successive waves of fiction creators (literary, cinematic, televisual, or video game) that have helped to enshrine the Second World War as a divisive moment in American history

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[227] The cover art for the individual stories can be found at 'Original Short Fiction Stories', *Rockstar Games Official Website*, https://www.rockstargames.com/lanoire/features/stories [accessed 21 August 2018].
[228] Indeed, the press releases very title affirms that the game 'provides setting' for the stories, not the other way around.
[229] Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines*, 32.
[230] Ibid., 11.
[231] Ibid., 32.

to serve their own purposes and prop up stereotypes about women's place in society. And one of the most enduring *noir* tropes is that of the *femme fatale.*

The *Femme Fatale*

Surveying the *fatale* figure in 1990s cinema, Kate Stables argues that for a postmodern, globalised cinema 'forced to embrace archetypes' that have currency across cultures, the myth of the 'fatal woman […] is the perfect symbol, combining fear and nostalgia in equal amounts'. The *fatale* figure 'is widely recognised as a result of a blanket of nineteenth-century European representations as well as earlier cinema incarnations', visibly appearing and also symbolically representing 'a creature of excess and spectacle, like the films she decorates.'[232] However, as other film scholars have noted, by and large the idea of an evil, manipulative *fatale* female that supposedly permeated post-war *film noir* is a 'mythic stereotype' that has proved useful to – and thus been perpetuated in – largely male-dominated film theory and criticism on *noir*.[233]

Unsurprisingly, the *femme fatale* is used in the legitimation and grounding of *LAN* in its cinematic context. The first 'Rockstar Recommends' post that accompanied the release of *LAN* was dedicated to *Detour*. The post cites the *femme fatale* figure as one of the key, recognisable conventions of *noir*, as well as pointing out that this film in particular features 'Ann Savage as perhaps one of the most conniving, manipulative and altogether evil femme fatales in the history of cinema'.[234] On a similar theme, the blog post that followed featured *Scarlet Street,* and also made note of the way in which a 'good-hearted man' falling for the *femme fatale* is the principal cause of the 'gut-wrenching' downfall of this character.[235] Aside from a brief mention of the *fatale* figure in *Double Indemnity* in the 'film noir roundup' post,[236] there is only one further mention of a *femme fatale*, and it is in relation to players' knowledge of the period: 'For those wrapped up in the allure of 1940s Los Angeles and the hardboiled detectives, conniving criminals and glamorous femme fatales that inhabit it'.[237] Yet despite the seemingly synonymous association of the *femme*

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[232] Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the Femme Fatale in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 1998), 167; For more on the *femme fatale's* global resonances and iterations, see Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, eds., *The* Femme Fatale*: Images, Histories, Contexts* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
[233] See Martin, '"Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!": The Central Women of 40s Films Noirs'.
[234] 'Rockstar Recommends: 'Detour'".
[235] 'Rockstar Recommends: 'Scarlet Street'".
[236] 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up – Part One'.
[237] 'Rockstar Recommends: 'Scene of the Crime'".

fatale figure with the *noir* form, as noted, the experiences of women as central characters are not the significant feature of most of the films Rockstar recommend. Rather, the *femme fatale* is a checkbox trope presented as necessary to creating an authentic 1940s atmosphere, and an authentic *noir*.[238]

Arguably, because of the way *femme fatale* has been used as shorthand to refer to any and all women in *noirs*,[239] many of the female NPCs in *LAN* might be read in terms of the way they conform to broad, sweeping generalisations of *fatale* conventions; investigated for the way they bring about trouble for men, and are punished (in different ways) for it. Yet the character who has the most *fatale* impact on the overarching story of *LAN* and Cole Phelps – and therefore appears to be intended to constitute *LAN*'s primary *femme fatale* – is Elsa Lichtmann. On the *LAN* Wiki, a section dedicated to Elsa's personality notes that 'Her relationship and events with Cole gives [*sic*] her the role of a femme fatale mixed with a tragic heroine. She is a desirable woman who has a dangerous romance with the main protagonist, and is comprised from a very tragic and difficult past.'[240] Immediately then it becomes clear that she has been designated the *femme fatale* role due to both her involvement in the narrative and what players come to learn about her background. Having fled from the Nazis after the murder of her parents, moreover, makes her not only 'fatal' but also 'foreign'. But aside from these surface level details, it is difficult to pin down what it is about her character that makes her fit the role. That is, other than her physical presentation in box art or promotional images (*figure. 21*), and the relatively brief interactions Phelps has with her during her infrequent appearances in the story, there is little substance to her, or the 'fatality' of her actions.

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[238] As Hanson and O'Rawe write, 'the link between the *femme* and *noir* is a tautological one: if a film has a *femme fatale*, it is a *film noir*, and in order to qualify as a *noir*, the *femme* is indispensable'. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, 'Introduction', in *The* Femme Fatale*: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

[239] Martin argues that scholars are wont to read women in these films in any way other than being *fatale*. See Martin, '"Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!": The Central Women of 40s Films Noirs'.

[240] In article 'Elsa Lichtmann', subsection 'Personality', *L.A. Noire Wiki*, http://lanoire.wikia.com/wiki/Elsa_Lichtmann [last edit 4 March 2016].

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 21. Promotional banner for the remaster of LAN *(2017), taken from official* Rockstar *website, featuring* Elsa *on the right.*[241]

What the promotion and fan recognition of Elsa as *fatale* suggests however is that the term, like *film noir,* has come to encompass a range of meanings far beyond the 'original' definition: victimised, controlled and manipulated women who prove fatal to the male hero, even if, perhaps, they do not intend to be (*Chinatown's* Evelyn Mulwray, for example), is a far-flung characterisation from the manipulative, 'dangerous' women who wielded the power and control for themselves (Phyllis Dietrichsen in *Double Indemnity*; Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon*). Since Elsa bears little resemblance to her 'classic' *film noir* counterparts, reading her as such suggests that, firstly, she better resembles the *neo-noir* woman, and secondly, that the term, as has been remarked elsewhere, has come to mean anything that one requires it to; a usefully unstable archetype that can simply connote *noir*.[242]

The first sight players are given of Elsa is when Phelps is introduced to her by Roy Earle, in a cutscene of one of the Traffic cases. Earle takes Phelps to the jazz club The

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[241] *L.A. Noire Official Website,* Rockstar Games, https://www.rockstargames.com/lanoire/ [accessed 23 August 2018]. Notably, Elsa did not feature on the original box art for the game, suggesting a further crystallisation of the association of '*femme fatale'* with *'noir'* in the intervening years.

[242] In James Maxfield's work on the appearances of The Fatal Woman as a 'source of male anxiety' in classic to more recent noirs, the examples of female characters in the films that he cites suggests that the term femme fatale has become far more 'ambiguous', as noir women have become more and more 'conflicted in their intentions', and noir stories have, since the 1960s, solicited more 'complex responses' from their audiences than their 1940s to 50s counterparts. See James F. Maxfield, *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991* (London: Associated University Press, 1996); See also Helen Hanson, 'The Big Seduction: Feminist Film Criticism and the *Femme Fatale*', in *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, ed. Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 214–27; Hanson and O'Rawe, 'Introduction'.

Blue Room to celebrate his successful closure of another case. Elsa is in her dressing room, being 'treated' with morphine by Dr Harlan Fontaine, and is far from forthcoming to Earle's suggestion that she meet Phelps. She proclaims her distaste for police officers and refers to him as 'Untersturmführer', before he slaps her, calling her a 'German junkie whore'. As in *RDR*, the sexuality of the male protagonist's love interest is used as a weapon to taunt or denigrate him. As Marston's former associates call Abigail a 'whore', after Phelps' affair with Elsa is exposed, he is a pariah in the department; called a 'rat', while other detectives chide 'How'd you like porking that German whore?'.[243] These interactions offer the most evidence of her *fatale*-ness, in that she represents the other side of the stereotypically 'classic' *film noir* dichotomy of women to Phelps's wife; she the 'exciting, childless whore', to the 'boring, potentially childbearing sweetheart' (who is, moreover, only shown three brief times in the entire game).[244]

Aside from this, Elsa is only ever seen through odd cutscenes which are scattered across the first half of the game narrative, appearing before, after, or in the middle of individual cases. Initially, she is only seen in The Blue Room. Another way that Elsa is therefore designated as a *fatale* character therefore is by her submersion in an environment that is both physically and racially prescribed as dark. That is, not only is she predominantly shown to inhabit only night-time, urban spaces, but representations of women once again here take on racial overtones. The Blue Room is one of the few game spaces that Black Americans inhabit; as waiters and more especially, the jazz musicians that accompany Elsa. She is depicted at various points in the game to be friendly with them. While white but *othered* herself, she exists in a space of racial *otherness*; one that is frequented, enjoyed and thus consumed by the largely white American patrons.

In one cutscene at The Blue Room, wedged in the space between two of the Homicide cases, Elsa performs onstage, fixed in front of the microphone, while being watched silently by Phelps, who sits alone at one of the tables. Another cutscene between the cases 'The White Shoe Slaying' and 'The Studio Secretary Murder' has similar content, with the addition of an interaction between Phelps and the African American doorman and maître d'– suggesting a familiarity between them, as a result of Phelps' frequent visits. For the duration of the cutscene – just under a minute long – the perspective on Elsa is either Phelps', or a wide shot of her performance (*figure. 22, 23, 24*).[245]

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[243] From mission 'The Gas Man'.
[244] Harvey, 'Woman's Place', 25.
[245] A similar cutscene is present in the mission 'A Walk in Elysian Fields', in which Phelps is drinking and watching Elsa sing, after the dissolution of his marriage.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 22: Cutscene: Phelps entering The Blue Room, watching Elsa's performance.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 23. Cutscene: tracking shot following Elsa on stage.

IMAGE REDACTED

Figure 24: Cutscene: Following shot of Phelps sitting, still watching Elsa perform.

For many feminist film critics, the *femme fatale* in *film noir* offered a potential site of resistance, reading women's performances 'against the grain' and thus resisting what theorists like Laura Mulvey saw as the 'male gaze', the dominant viewing position that objectified women in narrative cinema.[246] We might then compare this sequence in *LAN* with, for example, Rita Hayworth's iconic performance in *Gilda*, as read by Richard Dyer. For Gilda, signing 'Put the Blame on Mame' on stage is a carefully-controlled performance of who and what people (including her ex-lover) *think* she is. She is mobile and active, and offers, as Dyer argues, resistance to the immobilising effects of the male gaze, where women were still and 'to be looked at'.[247] Yet instead of 'recommending' *Gilda* to potential players – an oft-cited, canonical example of *film noir* — Hayworth features in Rockstar Recommends only in her role in *The Lady from Shanghai,* where she is described as merely an 'international sex symbol', and that the film was made with 'her then husband Orson Welles.'[248] Elsa's stasis – and the fact she is shot from behind while

[246] A number of these studies originally appeared in the influential E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction to New Edition', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 1998); See also Hanson and O'Rawe, 'Introduction'; Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18; Though Mulvey's theory was widely critiqued (for the way it overlooked issues of female or queer spectatorship, for example), it still has resonance beyond film studies, and has been applied to video games by, for example, Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant, 'Bridging Games Studies and Feminist Theories' And across Sarkeesian's 'Tropes vs Women' series.
[247] Richard Dyer, 'Resistance Through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 1998), 115–22.
[248] 'Rockstar Recommends: A Film Noir Round Up - Part One'.

the camera lingers on Phelps' gaze upon her – reduce her to the stereotypical performance of the *femme fatale* as scopophilic material for the male detective, and is reaffirmed by her inclusion in promotional materials frozen in time while preforming on stage for Phelps/the player (*figure. 21*). This image of her is a reductive representation of what women could be and do in such films, legitimised by the films which are paratextually cited.

During the mission 'Manifest Destiny', Phelps/the player interrogates Elsa about her knowledge of the trade of army surplus morphine at the club and beyond. She is generally hostile to questioning, requiring players to choose the 'Bad Cop' interrogation option,[249] but which results in little information useful to the case, or rather, no further clues, locations, or persons of interest to investigate that would assist players in progressing. A cutscene then shows Phelps asking Earle to give him until the morning before they continue their investigations. When Elsa leaves the club in a taxi, a gameplay sequence requires players to tail the taxi. The cutscene that follows shows Phelps entering her apartment building and knocking on her front door. She welcomes him inside and, though not shown, it is inferred that this is the point from which they begin an affair.

Not the 'black widow' of the original *film noirs,* shown to be 'actively involved in the violent assault on the conventional values of family life',[250] despite letting him into her apartment (silently, passively), nothing about her demeanour suggests that she has actively conspired to ensnare Phelps in a relationship. Indeed, the gameplay sequence preceding the cutscene requires the player to covertly tail Elsa as she travels from The Blue Room to her apartment. The mission fails and must be replayed if the player is caught in the process of in doing so.[251] Nor does she seem to will any of the fallout that follows. In fact, after the exposure of the affair by the press, and the breakdown of Phelps's marriage in the wider game narrative, Elsa only seems *content* with her new relationship with him:

> Elsa: It's the new man in my life. He's convinced me to fight my addiction…[Phelps] can finally see from a human perceptive [after his demotion], rather than the ivory tower he created

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[249] 'Bad Cop' is one of the interrogation options for the *LAN* remaster, along with 'Accuse' and 'Good Cop'. This was changed from the original release of *LAN*, which offered players the choice of 'Truth', 'Doubt', and 'Lie'. To use 'Bad Cop'/'Doubt' means to aggressively confront the suspect/witness to give you further evidence, which their body language suggests they are withholding. 'Accuse/Lie' required the player to present evidence that they had collected during the case to refute the witness/suspect's claim.
[250] Harvey, 'Woman's Place', 31.
[251] A specific achievement/trophy, 'The Shadow', rewards players for following Elsa home without being spotted. In the final Vice case 'Manifest Destiny'.

> for himself. It's making him stronger and it's making me stronger helping him.[252]

Likewise, when players take control of Jack Kelso as required in the final game missions, Elsa once again becomes instrumental to the plot. Phelps, shut out of his investigation into a conspiracy behind a series of arson attacks, asks her to solicit Kelso's help in investigating the corruption in which the city's officials and police are both implicated. Though again she does little to encourage Kelso, it is heavily implied that he develops romantic feelings for her too. She remains the female character onto which the male sexual feelings attach with alarming frequency, and is the instigator of some kind of ill befalling them.

In this regard, Elsa seemingly does function as a take on the *femme fatale* role, but only insofar as the male detectives' relationship with her proves a *fatal* catalyst for their story arc. It is because of Phelps' extra-marital affair with her that his career is ruined, setting the final section of the game on a downward spiral towards its conclusion, and his eventual death. Likewise, Kelso finds himself on the wrong side of several gangsters who hospitalise him while he pursues the conspiracy, following a lead given to him by Elsa. Yet it cannot be said that she appears to do much to *consciously* exercise any control over the situation. She does little to encourage either man in any of the cutscenes she appears, or in the two instances in which players interrogate her to advance the progression of the case at hand. More to the point, players have *no choice* as to whether or not Phelps pursues a relationship with her. Shown entirely in cutscenes, their relationship is thus all part of the wider 'cinematic' nature of the game narrative– suggestive of how classically *noir* it is with its *femme fatale* who leads the man astray. It is however the man's decision to pursue her, not a result of her intentional seduction.

Though Elsa is presented as if she is a 'classic' *femme fatale* (just as *LAN* is framed in terms of its likeness to a 'classic' *film noir*), with a suitably informed, historicised backstory grounded in a story of post-war emigration, she is unavoidably a construction informed by the presentations of *fatale* characters in post-1970s neo-*noirs*. Rather than a 'sexually threatening' female, as depicted in more recent, postmodern variations on the noir genre,[253] Elsa can be viewed most explicitly as a neo-*noir* mutation on the archetype, as

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[252] From mission 'A Different Kind of War (Part 1)'.

[253] Kate Stables describes this as the sort of female characterisation which has come to dominate the 'erotic thriller' (and films such as *Basic Instinct*), with its combination of explicit sexuality and violence. See 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice'.

'victim'.[254] Elsa is either the victim of Roy Earle and Dr. Fontaine, who keep her drugged and compliant at the club, or, as she herself insinuates, she is the victim of one of the many men who have tried to 'touch' her in her lifetime.[255] Lacking much agency of her own, and yet constructed as though she is a 'classic' *femme fatale*, Elsa is both an historically and cinematically legitimated victim of either the Nazis or of successive masculine control, present solely to be watched, interrogated and act a plot device to advance the game narrative.

Where the *femme fatale* figure, as Samantha Lindop argues, 'operates outside the law and overwhelmingly uses her sexuality as a weapon to exploit male desire', in juxtaposition, the *faux fatale* figure is often a 'redeemer': 'honest, law-abiding, and unmindful of the potential power of their sexuality', which 'situates them as relatively non-threatening entities'. Additionally what also marks them as different from the *femme fatale* is that these women 'demonstrate a capacity (as well as a desire) to form romantic relationships based solely on love (as opposed to an opportunity for wealth)', and so 'despite their independence, these figures uphold idealised traditionalist notions of romance that, in patriarchal society, work to maintain gendered power relations through the controlling of women'.[256] This particular dichotomy which presents itself in the constructions of female characters in the classic *noir* films is of particular use to considerations of *LAN*'s presentation of Elsa, as its (only) narratively significant female character. It appears as though this character (intentionally or otherwise) straddles a line between *faux* and *femme fatale*— never appearing consciously manipulative of or in control of her situation, and ultimately becoming little more than a romantic attachment for Phelps (and to an extent, Kelso). Elsa is used as a symbol to support and arguably authenticate the inherent *noir*-ness of the game's overarching narrative, by adding *femme fatale* to the tally of *noir* icons the game references and plays homage to. The (limited) construction of Elsa's character is used as merely a way of advancing a male narrative and adding to the sense of cinematic recognition the game aspires to, while at the same time imparting a small amount of historicised biographical information about her own past, to create the illusion that this is a 'real' character conceivably drawn directly out of the past, as well as out of *noir*.

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[254] Jeanne Schüler and Patrick Murray, "'Anything Is Possible Here" Capitalism, Neo-Noir, and Chinatown', in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed., Mark T. Conrad, 167-181, 169.
[255] She tells Jack Kelso in the mission 'House of Sticks' that her friend Lou Bulchwater, with whom she emigrated from Germany, was the only man who ever loved her who didn't try to touch her.
[256] Lindop, *Postfeminism and the Fatal Figure,* 36.

But where the 'original' *femme fatales* of classic *noir* might have been constructed and portrayed with a sense of 'complex characterisation', the postmodern *femme fatale,* as seen here, is readapted to represent to a figure in a mass-marketable 'spectacle' of 'sexual obsession and violence', and her character is reduced to something 'broadly drawn' and 'archetypal'[257]—suggestive of what viewers/players *expect* to see or recognise in these kinds of female characters, but not necessarily containing all of the 'complex' component parts. Elsa is the *femme fatale* as plot device, an icon and image that signifies *noir*-ness and men's experience of it, *not* a character in her own right.

Thus while *LAN*'s narrative claimed to offer an authentic historical and cinematic experience – by tapping into 'zeitgeist' themes such as the breakdown of the traditional family and its meaning and values, and offering players a 'f*emme fatale*' of sorts – it does so in a highly particular way that makes both of these influential histories of 'real' and cinematic women serve the purpose of a narrative that is merely expressive of male action. In doing so, once again history is made to fit the proclivities and needs of Rockstar's brand identity, influenced and legitimized by a paratextual discourse that marshals historical complexities into consumable image populated by neat generalisations.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the way women are textually and paratextually represented with regard to *RDR* and *LAN*, and how the discourses of historical or cultural authenticity surrounding the games can suggest meanings that either conflict with or underpin textual representations of gender and difference. For *RDR,* promotional discourses that claim to inform players of 'the True West' may appear on the surface to allude to some kind of New Western History – including women alongside men as examples of historical realities, claiming to dispel notions of stereotypical binaries created by popular culture and offering complexities instead. But this post does not illuminate the experience of women in the West. Rather, it centres on an atypical one: an outlaw who fits the general profile of Rockstar's creation of playable protagonist, and thus whose existence helps maintain the brand values Rockstar curate through their games. As in many histories of the American West then, it is the few 'pioneering' women – 'the rare Annie Oakleys' – who are allowed to exist, in opposition to 'the scores of anonymous women who

[257] Stables, "The Postmodern Always Rings Twice", 166.

conceived of their experience through familial and community networks, kinships, and collaboration.'[258]

But for the representation of women in *RDR* itself, allusions to historical complexity never pay-off. Throughout the course of the game players are told certain things about women – how they fit into its particular time and place – in ways that they cannot miss or ignore, of they intend to progress its (hi)story from start to finish. Ultimately, they are singular elements in what is otherwise resolutely characterised as a 'man's world', a Western space characterised by male violence and action. Though on the surface all three of the major female characters in *RDR* appear to be 'strong' or able to 'look after themselves' to further their own goals, the necessity of the game and its singular (male) playable protagonists insists that they can do nothing without the player, and thus John Marston's help. Their characterisation as strong is torn down when their sexuality is weaponised either against them, or against the male protagonist.

Thus, the sincerity with which some paratextual discourses like the 'True West' blog or downloadable wallpapers try and assert the strength and complexity of these characters, or the way in which masculinity is satirised in the text itself, may have an ulterior aim: to project a self-conscious progressiveness. Ultimately, Rockstar's branding and values in making games – and their creation of historiographical materials more generally – privilege and ensure a textual version of Western history which necessitates it being a brutal space defined by violence. Women cannot exist outside of these confines, and thus there is little space for a more progressive, revisionist depiction of women in the West, which remains resolutely a man's world.

Similarly, the use of the 'real' murders of women like Elizabeth Short or Jeanne French to promote *LAN*, and creating fictionalised cases based on them, are 'facts' or past details chosen specifically because they serve a purpose for Team Bondi and Rockstar's narrative aims. They are neither objective nor representative 'truths' about the past. The repeated connections made to the Black Dahlia case offers a convenient shorthand in promotional rhetoric that is supposed to support textual claims that tensions between men and woman was representative of historical realities.

In the case of *LAN*'s textual representation of women, what the player is told about them is part of the very investigation mechanic that allows them to progress from case to case, desk to desk. Part of what they are 'investigating' is these women's personalities, their characters, and how they do or do not fit into their historical context.

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[258] Smyth, *Nobody's Girl Friday*, 16.

Regardless of the complexities and pervasiveness of women in work before, during and after this period – in Hollywood or elsewhere in America's workforce – this complicated history is cleaned up and shot through a Rockstar-approved set of conventions, tropes, and themes, to fit a narrative of male-fatalism and ill-conformity in past American society. The polarities of women's characterisation, as either difficult or naïve, are created as veritable strawmen; paratextually and textually legitimised and authenticated to serve as plot points in a narrative of masculinity in crisis, and men losing their place in the increasingly 'modern' world. Furthermore, the way characters talk, and the extent to which brutalised bodies are displayed, intended to be interacted with, and the explicitness of the way themes like rape and child molestation are discussed by characters, arguably owes much more to contemporary neo-*noir*'s representation of 1940s Hollywood and obsession with images of brutalised women than would have been present in the movies of the period itself. An impression of an impression, it draws in and inevitably enshrines all of the crystallised, negative representations of women as powerless victims. Similarly, the role of the *femme fatale* is reduced from a complex and shifting character archetype which may have held some possibility for resisting male domination or exerting her own control, to a character whose ultimate function is merely a *noir*-signalling plot device, 'to-be-looked-at' and interrogated by the player and playable protagonists.

This is not simply a question of simplicity versus complexity, however: it is about *how* these periods have been intentionally simplified, and to what end. The mundanities and complexities of life as it was experienced by women hardly meshes with the stories of 'adventure' and 'drama' that spring to mind when one thinks of the history of the American West.[259] A *noir*-tinged story of conspiracy, corruption, violence and murder is more suited to an action-adventure video game than a narrative about the post-war period as 'the age of doubt'.[260] Just as historians of 'the West' or wartime America long overlooked the lived and diverse female experiences of or perspectives on these periods,[261] Rockstar similarly create these histories from their perspective, whereby anyone who does not fit into it – in stereotypes or minor useful roles – is excluded from both textual and paratextual narratives, written by men. The demands of Rockstar's brand, and what it offers players, as well as the video game form itself, put constraints on

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[259] Susan Armitage, 'Women and Men in Western History: A Stereoptical Vision', *Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1985): 395.
[260] William Graebner, *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990).
[261] Armitage, 'Women and Men in Western History: A Stereoptical Vision', 383; Riley, 'Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies'.

what is deemed viable to portray. Basic as this may seem to reiterate, it has a profound effect both textually and paratextually. Such is the power of the brand to dictate what can be shown and said about the past, and the currency of dominant generic perceptions and popular histories that are used to underpin it.

As the culmination of the interconnected strands of this thesis, what these design and marketing choices ultimately suggest is that Rockstar uphold and perpetuate the aforementioned 'Hegemony of Play'.[262] While white-masculinity and an action-adventure setting are the game's ultimate currency, paratextually speaking Rockstar's communication to fans – via developer interviews and other public-facing discourses – privileges and gives fundamental authority to the voice of the white male executive. It is they who have the power to 'author', in these spaces, the meanings of the games, setting the boundaries of expectation well before a player (whatever their individual demographic may be) picks up the game for themselves. Here however it takes on another meaning and significance. In promotional materials, Rockstar's elite attempt to author and control the meaning of the historical narrative that *RDR* and *LAN* offer players, while within the games themselves it is white men who are both at the centre of and the window onto the history that has been written. Both are the apex – and cost – of creating history by way of the Rockstar brand.

[262] Fron et al., 'The Hegemony of Play'.

Conclusion: 'Rockstar Games Presents'… American History?

'People are going to buy [Red Dead Redemption 2] regardless, the trailers could just be Sam and Dan Houser counting their money and it'd probably break pre-order records.'

Thomas Broome-Jones, 'Why We Shouldn't Be Worried About *Red Dead Redemption 2*'.[1]

This thesis began by interrogating Rockstar's brand identity. Much of that identity hinged on Rockstar occupying roles as leader and outsider of the games industry; or at the very least, 'outlaws' within it. While this is deeply contradictory, popular discourse and Rockstar's own branding activities have long sought to position Rockstar as renegades, offering their own authored vision of America from their positions within and outside it.[2] To conclude this thesis, and to bring up-to-date the themes and arguments that have been explored, I will reflect on the marketing and reception of *RDR2*. Unsurprisingly, this discourse only further asserted Rockstar's association with the 'outlaw' image, suggesting that Rockstar's past success continues to exert a tangible impact on the company's present engagements with American history.

A prequel set twelve years before *RDR* in 1899, *RDR2* chronicles the Van Der Linde gang's downward spiral from infamy to devastation. Aside from introducing new characters like the (once again, white-male) playable-protagonist Arthur Morgan, it featured many familiar faces like John Marston, his family, and Dutch Van Der Linde. It was in many respects therefore a pre-sold product. Indeed, upon release in October 2018, *RDR2* lived up to expectations, earning $725 million in the first three days, the best opening weekend in entertainment history.[3] It sold more copies in the first eight days than *RDR* had in eight years: as one by-line put it, it was a 'gold rush'.[4] *RDR2*'s tagline,

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[1] Thomas Broome-Jones, 'Why We Shouldn't Be Worried About *Red Dead Redemption 2*', *Cultured Vultures*, 8 May 2018, https://culturedvultures.com/why-we-shouldnt-be-worried-about-red-dead-redemption-2/ [accessed 8 May 2018].

[2] For a recent example of this, see Whitaker, 'Rockstar's History of America'.

[3] It did not, however, outstrip the sales of *GTAV*, which earned $1 billion in the same timeframe. See Christopher Dring, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Makes $725 Million in Three Days', *Gamesindustry.Biz*, 30 October 2018, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-10-30-red-dead-redemption-2-makes-usd725-million-in-three-days [accessed 30 October 2018]; IGN Staff, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Achieves Biggest Opening Weekend in Entertainment History', *IGN*, 30 October 2018, https://uk.ign.com/articles/2018/10/30/red-dead-redemption-2-achieves-biggest-opening-weekend-in-entertainment-history [accessed 30 October 2018].

[4] Christopher Dring, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* UK Sales More than Double the First Game', *Gamesindustry.Biz*, 28 October 2018, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-10-28-red-dead-redemption-2-uk-sales-more-than-double-the-first-game [accessed 28 October 2018]; Tom Phillips, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Sold More in Eight Days than *RDR1* Did in Eight Years', *Eurogamer*, 8 November 2018,

'Outlaws for Life', was a riff on a slogan that had been associated with *RDR*'s marketing: 'Outlaws to the End'.[5] The tagline appeared on billboards in New York City,[6] a banner on the game's official webpage,[7] and t-shirts purchasable from the Rockstar Warehouse, part of the 'Outlaw Essentials Collection'.[8] The maintenance of Rockstar's 'outlaw' status came full circle, while marketing also sought to highlight that Rockstar was about to revolutionise open world games – *again.*[9]

The Rockstar brand has a synergetic relationship with the individual franchises that support and underpin it. The values and expectations of making 'a Rockstar game' dictate what can be (and is) included in their games, while the games themselves work to perpetuate the branding of 'a Rockstar game' – a mutual reinforcement. Rockstar's games are sold as authentic branded products because of this dedication to the qualities players are told to expect. The way the values of the brand – as highlighted in chapter one – remain consistent, but each time manifest in different historic and/or contemporary settings, corresponds with the way media scholars have broadly defined the logics of marketing, and how 'genre' functions.[10]

But brands – especially video game brands – do not have to be consistent in what they offer or what their values appear to be. Developers increasingly sell historical games which they claim offer access to untold stories.[11] Moreover, indie developers inspired by

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https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-11-08-red-dead-redemption-2-sold-more-in-eight-days-than-rdr1-did-in-eight-years [accessed 8 November 2018].

[5] This was the name of a DLC pack which allowed players to undertake co-operative missions together in *RDR*'s online mode.

[6] Paulo Sirio, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Billboards show New Artwork in New York City', *Gamepur,* 7 August 2018, https://www.gamepur.com/news/29578-red-dead-redemption-2-billboards-new-artworks.html [accessed 6 September 2018].

[7] Banner found at the bottom of the official home page for *RDR2* See 'Red Dead Redemption 2', *Rockstar Games*, https://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption2/ [accessed 6 September 2018].

[8] 'The Red Dead Redemption 2 Outlaw Essentials Collection Limited-Edition Gear and Collectibles Coming Soon', *Rockstar Newswire*, 30 August 2018, https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/60543/The-Red-Dead-Redemption-2-Outlaw-Essentials-Collection?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=rdr2-outlawec-08302018&utm_content=newswire [accessed 30 August 2018].

[9] This rhetoric was affirmed by promotional materials like gameplay trailers, where voiceover instructed viewers that 'with *Red Dead Redemption 2,* Rockstar Games has set out to create its most ambitious open world experience to date. It is an epic tale of outlaw life that seamlessly blends story with action, and exploration with choice, all under the constant threat of danger.' See 'Red Dead Redemption 2: Official Gameplay Video Part 2', *YouTube*, uploaded by Rockstar Games, 1 October 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb-tlY6ytk8 [accessed 1 October 2018].

[10] For broad discussion of genre's reworking and development through 'repetition and difference', see Neale, *Genre and Hollywood.*

[11] For example, Ubisoft had always sought to establish themselves as a developer committed to diversity, but while the initial instalments of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise were preoccupied with white men in (predominantly) the western world, over the years introduced non-western centric perspectives and non-white and non-male characters, culminating in games set in ancient Egypt and Rome. See Murray, 'The Poetics of Form and the Politics of Identity in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*'; Hammar, 'Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play'. Franchises known for their 'war game' branding such as *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*

their work *with* Rockstar have gone on to make games about underrepresented events in non-Western history.[12] In comparison, despite a claimed-commitment to innovation Rockstar continue to demonstrate a stubborn reluctance to revise certain core brand tenets, especially with respect to playable-protagonists who are resolutely male, and overwhelmingly white in characterisation and outlook. Indeed, while certain marketing and gameplay elements for *RDR2* gestured toward a more inclusive Western world,[13] this was a story about its protagonist Arthur Morgan, and his relationships with other men like Dutch and Marston. Though their oldest chronologically, Morgan is the spiritual successor to all of Rockstar's 'difficult' male protagonists. The ramifications of this for the way they have created historical games is of course profound, as this thesis has argued. Whether considering *GTA, RDR* and *LAN*, or now *RDR2*, all of these games – defined by their setting within specifically American spaces and historic periods – are constructed from the perspective of what it means to be a man.

Yet it is telling that *RDR2*'s marketing saw a pared-back performance of Rockstar-as-historian – that is, compared to the promotion of *RDR* and *LAN*, as has been explored in this thesis. There was no 'True West' series on the *Newswire* that offered players 'insight' into the historical research the company had undertaken. There was no 'Rockstar Recommends' series wherein Rockstar could play film-historian. The promotion Rockstar undertook did however, broadly speaking, continue to suggest the authenticity

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have similarly moved away from presenting the war in entirely hegemonic white-male terms. Though not immune to backlash from some gamers when doing so, individual titles like *Battlefield 1* (2016) and *Battlefield V* (2018) used African-American and female soldiers respectively as core to both the branding of the games, and as a key aspect of the single player and online multiplayer gameplay they afforded. Though keeping their core stories and thematic engagements intact, the representations on offer – if only surface level differences – began to change in the face of a games industry and culture that increasingly demanded a shift away from hegemonic masculinity and representations of race. See for example Megan Farokhmanesh, 'EA on the backlash against women in *Battlefield V*: 'Accept it or don't buy the game'", The Verge, 12 June 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/12/17453728/ea-women-in-battlefield-v-backlash-response [accessed 13 November 2018]; Luke Plunkett, 'Oh No, There Are Women in *Battlefield V*', Kotaku, 25 May 2018, https://kotaku.com/oh-no-there-are-women-in-battlefield-v-1826275455 [accessed 13 November 2018].

[12] See Owen Good, 'Former Rockstar Dev Working on Game About Iranian Revolution', *Kotaku,* 16 February 2011, http://kotaku.com/5762702/former-rockstar-dev-working-on-game-about-iranian-revolution [accessed 13 November 2018]; Evan Narcisse, 'When *Grand Theft Auto* Let Iranian Teenagers Do Things They Could Only Dream Of', *Kotaku*, 21 June 2012, http://kotaku.com/5920325/when-grand-theft-auto-let-iranian-teenagers-do-things-they-could-only-dream-of?tag=1979 [accessed 13 November 2018].

[13] For example, the use of female voiceover in gameplay videos, as opposed to male, or including female outlaws and people of colour as part of the Van Der Linde gang. See Esther Wright, 'Women Out of Date', *Bullet Points Monthly*, 30 November 2018, http://www.bulletpointsmonthly.com/2018/11/12/women-out-of-date/ [accessed 30 November 2018]; Other features have praised the inclusion of black characters while chastising (albeit mildly) RDR's involvement in wider processes of whitewashing Western history. See Funké Joseph, '*Red Dead Redemption 2's* Black Cowboys Are Important', *IGN*, 27 September 2018, https://uk.ign.com/articles/2018/09/27/red-dead-redemption-2s-black-cowboys-are-important [accessed 27 September 2018].

of several different and interlocking aspects of *RDR2*'s historical world: the kinds of landscapes and wildlife players encounter, that players would need to hunt to survive, or the various types of horses they could ride.[14] Paratexts again turned these gameplay and narrative features into individualised 'capitalizable elements',[15] intended to suggest that the combination of them created a game world that was 'authentic'.[16] Mirroring this, anticipatory preview articles overwhelmingly praised Rockstar's success at achieving 'realism', capturing an 'authentic' snapshot of this historical world, and incorporating seemingly-limitless details that made the world feel 'alive' and atmospheric. Critics – who were themselves overwhelmingly men[17] – looked past the potential negative connotations and Rockstar's reductionist proclivities because of the spectacular, overwhelming nature of the world they had supposedly created.[18] This glowing praise was reposted on Rockstar's Twitter feed, with the choicest excerpts of the reviews featured in their own *Newswire* post, creating a feedback loop between company-generated and press

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[14] Rockstar Games, 'Wildlife', *Rockstar Games*, accessed 24 September 2018, https://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption2/features/wildlife.

[15] Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema'.

[16] The *Red Dead Redemption 2* official website contained sections for information on all of these gameplay and game world elements. See 'Features', *Red Dead Redemption 2 Official Website*, https://www.rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption2/features/wildlife [accessed 24 September 2018].

[17] That is, on or around 20 September 2018, when a number of outlets around the world posted reviews of a two-hour demo they were given to play by Rockstar, almost all of the contributing authors to those (p)reviews were male.

[18] See for example Nick Cowen, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Exclusive Gameplay Preview: Riding with the Dutch van Der Linde Gang', *The Telegraph*, 4 May 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gaming/features/red-dead-redemption-2-exclusive-gameplay-preview-riding-dutch/ [accessed 4 May 2018]; Nick Cowen, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* | How Rockstar Is Building Its Biggest Ever Game', *The Telegraph*, 3 May 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gaming/features/red-dead-redemption-2-rockstar-building-biggest-ever-game/ [accessed 3 May 2018]; Broome-Jones, 'Why We Shouldn't Be Worried About *Red Dead Redemption 2*'; IGN Staff, '79 Amazing Little Details In *Red Dead Redemption 2*', *IGN*, 20 September 2018, http://uk.ign.com/articles/2018/09/20/79-amazing-little-details-in-red-dead-redemption-2 [accessed 20 September 2018]; Devin Coldewey, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Sees Rockstar Raising the Bar for Realism in Open-World Games', *TechCrunch*, 9 August 2018, https://techcrunch.com/2018/08/09/red-dead-redemption-2-sees-rockstar-raising-the-bar-for-realism-in-open-world-games/ [accessed 9 August 2018]; Toby Berger, 'We Played *Red Dead Redemption 2* And It's Shaping Up To Be A Masterpiece', *Press Start Australia*, 21 September 2018, https://press-start.com.au/previews/2018/09/21/we-played-red-dead-redemption-2-and-its-shaping-up-to-be-a-masterpiece/ [accessed 21 September 2018]; Christopher Hooton, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* First Play Review: This Game Is Alive - Here's What We Learned After A Couple Of Hours Spent With It', *The Independent*, 21 September 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/gaming/...ameplay-xbox-one-ps4-map-characters-story-graphics-a8546481.html [accessed 21 September 2018]; Andrew Webster, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Hands-on: Two Hours With Rockstar's Wild West Epic', *The Verge*, 20 September 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/ 9/20/17879658/red-dead-redemption-2-hands-on-gameplay-preview-ps4-xbox [accessed 20 September 2018]; Harold Goldberg, 'How the West Was Digitized: The Making of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2*', *Vulture*, 14 October 2018, http://www.vulture.com/2018/10/the-making-of-rockstar-games-red-dead-redemption-2.html [accessed 14 October 2018]; Keza MacDonald, 'Get Real! Behind the Scenes of *Red Dead Redemption 2* - the Most Realisitic Video Game Ever Made', *The Guardian*, 24 October 2018, https://amp.theguardian.com/games/2018/oct/24/get-real-behind-the-scenes-of-red-dead-redemption-2-the-most-realistic-video-game-ever-made?__twitter_impression=true [accessed 24 October 2018].

discourse.[19] Thus, while gameplay trailers and other assorted promotional materials still sought to ground the game's action and narrative in historical realities, the overtly historiographical, pedagogical nature of these paratexts was markedly tempered.

Moreover, Dan Houser was far more deliberate in claiming, paradoxically, that *RDR2* is a work of historical fiction, but 'not a work of history'. To draw this rather conservative line under what constitutes 'proper' history, he uses the notion of 'accuracy'[20]: that to make something historically 'accurate' would be 'deeply unpleasant', given the 'oppressive' environment in which the game it set.[21] Apparently using Rockstar's artistic license to create an authentic story set in America's 'Wild West', which again seeks to place 'brutality' and 'realism' centre stage, does not extend to dealing with racism and other complicated historical elements in a meaningful way.[22] Even so, Houser couldn't help *but* attempt to historicise *RDR2,* going on to describe the period as one in which the 'women's movement' began, inspiring several characters in the game.[23] Elsewhere, Houser historicised the place of a singular Native American character in the game, and a time in which Indigenous peoples like him were being removed from their lands.[24] Deploying the rhetoric of 'historical fiction' arguably attempts to shield against the way that the game might have been criticised for, in its own way, dealing with the legacies of the complex processes like female disenfranchisement, institutionalised slavery, and colonial expansion and ethnic cleansing.

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[19] 'New Red Dead Redemption 2 Hands-On Previews', *Rockstar Newswire*, 20 September 2018, https://www.rockstargames.com/newswire/article/60582/New-Red-Dead-Redemption-2-Hands-On-Previews [accessed 20 September 2018].

[20] It is worth noting that Rockstar (and Take-Two) used claims of historical 'accuracy' to deflect against legal challenges to their representational choices, as in the case of their inclusion of Pinkerton Agents as *RDR2* antagonists. See Emily Gera, 'Rockstar Games Hits Back at Real Pinkertons Over "Red Dead Redemption 2" Lawsuit', *Variety*, 15 January 2019, https://variety.com/2019/gaming/news/red-dead-redemption-2-rockstar-pinkerton-lawsuit-1203108019/ [accessed 15 January 2019]; Adi Robertson, '*Red Dead Redemption 2's* Pinkerton Agents Are at the Center of a Lawsuit', *The Verge*, 14 January 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/14/18182017/red-dead-redemption-2-pinkerton-lawsuit-take-two-interactive-trademark-infringement [accessed 14 January 2019].

[21] Sam White, '*Red Dead Redemption 2*: The inside Story of the Most Lifelike Video Game Ever', *GQ*, 24 October 2018, https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/red-dead-redemption-2-interview; This interview was picked up and quoted elsewhere, such as in IGN Staff, 'Dan Houser "Thankful" Not To Be Releasing *Grand Theft Auto 6* Right Now', *IGN*, 24 October 2018, https://uk.ign.com/articles/2018/10/24/dan-houser-thankful-not-to-be-releasing-grand-theft-auto-6-right-now.

[22] Similar arguments about the distasteful racism that Rockstar tried to stay away from with *RDR* can be found in Charles Onyett, '*Red Dead Redemption*: A Man and His Horse'.

[23] White, '*Red Dead Redemption 2*'; Houser's awareness of the beginnings of the 'Women's Suffrage' movement are also claimed in Goldberg, 'How the West Was Digitized'.

[24] Houser does so, however, by seemingly indulging in long-held colonialist rhetoric concerning Native Americans' connection to nature: 'he's a gentle soul in that violent world.' Goldberg, 'How the West Was Digitized'.

As the epigraph of this conclusion illustrates, though, and judging by the game's fiscal performance, Rockstar hardly *needed* to sell their version of 'the West' anymore. If *RDR* made such an impression that *RDR2* became a successful prequel in its own right, Rockstar had little to prove by adding claims toward playing historian – and their authority to do so. Their credentials, and thus the game's authenticity as a Rockstar-branded vision of history, needed little further bolstering to ensure financial success and critical acclaim. This is a different, post-*RDR* and post-*GTAV* landscape, one in which Rockstar and Take-Two had to *manage* expectations, not heighten them.[25]

Perhaps more troublingly, this suggests that players and critics alike are willing to accept omissions or outright marginalisation for the sake of open world achievement, as was the case with *RDR*. It is telling that only now – when a new game that promised to be more technically impressive was about to be released – critics started to look back on *RDR* without rose-tinted glasses, and began to critique the historical attitudes of a title once widely-considered an instant classic.[26] Unsurprisingly, a wave of full-score reviews accompanied *RDR2*'s release, as well as claims that it 'signals the era of prestige video games', continuing to place Rockstar's achievements level with its televisual and cinematic contemporaries.[27] Few critics' ecstatic reviews of *RDR2* were reflective about the game's historical content, and how Rockstar chose to deal with it.[28] This lays bare the consequences of how the spectacular nature of the open world game (relative to the time of its release), and Rockstar's branded identity in pushing the boundaries of the medium, force people to concentrate on the newness, the technological advancements, rather than the regressive specificities which underpin them. Rockstar's own 'frontier' narrative of pushing into uncharted territory blends with the historically-narrow, capital-F Frontier narrative of the West, and continues to push to the margins attempts at inclusivity in

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[25] James Batchelor, 'Take-Two: "We Don't Believe in *Red Dead Redemption 2* Success until We Deliver It"'; Imran Khan, 'Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick Remarks On Whether *Red Dead Redemption II* Will Sell As Well As GTA'.

[26] Joseph, '*Red Dead Redemption 2's* Black Cowboys Are Important'; See also Waypoint Radio, *Waypoint 101 - Red Dead Redemption Part 1*, accessed 11 October 2018, https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/zm9k4e/red-dead-redemption-podcast-rockstar?utm_source=wptwitterus [accessed 11 October 2018].

[27] Nick Romano, 'The New West World: *Red Dead Redemption 2* Signals the Era of Prestige Video Games', *Entertainment Weekly*, 22 October 2018, https://ew.com/gaming/2018/10/22/red-dead-redemption-2-prestige-video-games/ [accessed 22 October 2018].

[28] See for example Josh Rivera, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Was Always Going to Be a Hit', *GQ*, 27 October 2018, https://www.gq.com/story/red-dead-redemption-2-was-always-going-to-be-a-hit [accessed 27 October 2018]; Alex Navarro, '*Red Dead Redemption 2* Review', *Giant Bomb*, 26 October 2018, https://www.giantbomb.com/reviews/red-dead-redemption-2-review/1900-787/ [accessed 26 October 2018], though the latter review still gave the game five-stars, and its criticisms were largely buried amidst adulation.

predominantly exclusive historical narratives. These are things we should bear increasingly in mind when we appraise new open world historical games that claim to push the preconceived boundaries of the medium.

Each strand of Rockstar's brand identity – leaders in open world design, their role as cultural historians, their mediation of cinematic references, and preoccupation with masculinity – comes together here in their final release to date, and continues to prevent the majority of popular discourse from challenging what it is Rockstar offer and claim to be 'real' and representative of America's past. What has likely become part of Rockstar's brand identity now is that, whether or not it is explicitly sold as 'historically authentic', this new game will be received with open arms precisely because it is Rockstar's version of the American West.

The case for studying historical game promotion

This thesis has provided the groundwork for the incorporation of promotional materials and other paratexts into the study of historical games; inherently complementing textual analysis to arrive at more nuanced understandings of how these media construct historical representations. In doing so, it has considered as broadly as possible how developers like Rockstar Games curate discourses of authenticity around the release of their products, and how analyses of these discourses are informed by also considering brand values.

By studying official communication in which Rockstar occupies a pedagogical role as developer-historian, we can unpick the image of American history that the company claims to offer players, even before they have access to these representations themselves. In doing so, we can comment on the ways in which they attempt to create and manage meaning, whether or not players eventually accept, oppose, or even choose to access these meanings in the first place. This performance of authenticity is two-fold: to historical 'authenticity' and to the Rockstar brand.

By surveying these discourses of authenticity, this thesis has interrogated the way paratexts seek to create historical narratives of their own, which support the image of history a developer has decided to adhere to or mimic in the games themselves. While functioning as both further accessible, Rockstar-curated 'content', and deliberately-designed 'promotion',[29] these discourses intentionally foreground the kinds of historying decisions that Rockstar have made – about what to incorporate into their vision of the

[29] Grainge and Johnson, *Promotional Screen Industries.*

past, and indeed, what not to. Picking and choosing fragments of historical details and cultural products and reordering them into a new narrative that suits their purpose, Rockstar are able to create their own historiographical discourse surrounding the release of their games that suggests their contents have basis in historical truth.

But at one and the same time, this both explicitly foregrounds *and* conceals the fact that there are more factors involved than just an ideologically-neutral, 'realist' simulation of the past.[30] We can see clearly what is privileged in these discourses, and what it suggests about Rockstar's positioning of their games vis-à-vis both historiography and wider cultural and popular discourse on these periods. It is especially revealing of the selectivity of the new canon Rockstar creates, and its dependence on pre-existing hypermasculine, brutalised cultural representations and historical details to support an in-game narrative that ultimately serves to uphold their brand image and values. It allows us to further unpick the way that these games are attempts to recreate history through a genre-tinted lens, and a particular vision of cultural history at that. *RDR* and *LAN* offer, it has been argued, a culturally legitimated view of formative moments of American history that marginalise all-but white men, that is inherently conservative, and that intentionally favours film-historical knowledge and play with pastness over historical approaches that have long sought to add nuance to the historiographic status-quo.

Even more particular than creating discourses of authenticity that incorporate historical details or cultural artefacts, other promotional materials specifically attempt to legitimise what players could do or encounter in the game's '*(hi)story-play-space.*'[31] Chapters four and five analysed *RDR* and *LAN*'s gameplay and narrative affordances in conjunction with the way they are presented and discussed in specific paratexts such as gameplay trailers and developer interviews. In doing so, it argued that every gameplay action players could undertake was paratextually conferred a sense of its historical authenticity. The gameplay experience was, therefore, marketed as 'complete', 'all-encompassing', or in some way 'realistic' compared to what things were like in the game's historical period. Working again to disguise the limitations of these gameplay affordances, they are nonetheless claimed to be embedded in a kind of truth.

Moreover, in exploring the way that certain groups appear in the game's narratives, we find promotional discourses doing similar work to establish *RDR* and *LAN*'s inclusion of women in Rockstar's version of history as authentic and

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[30] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 61.
[31] Ibid.

corresponding to real historical trends or people. Focussing on women – as the only demographic aside from white men who feature substantially in the games' promotional discourses – we see how paratexts try to engineer the potential political or ideological implications of problematic textual representations. While *RDR*'s promotion sought to promise an image of proto-feminist, anti-stereotypical women in the game, the promise never delivers. Textual analysis reveals that women are kept in their long-held position as singular elements in 'a man's world', forced to conform to masculine roles, endure brutalisation or sexualised abuse. On the other hand, the promotional discourse surrounding *LAN* sought to revive misconceptions about *film noir*'s 'zeitgeist' representation of post-war American society. By reinvestigating the 'Black Dahlia' murder, promotional interviews attempt to legitimate the fact that a substantial portion of the gameplay is dedicated to the observation of dead, objectified women who are merely props in the advancement of the game's narrative. By painting a portrait of post-war America as inherently hostile to newly 'liberated women' – troublesome to the men they emasculate through their freedom, bringing violence on themselves – paratextual and textual historical narratives work in tandem to suggest this was the norm. The implications for the reliance on this zeitgeist view of American history – and of the way it has been upheld by decades of *neo-noir* fictions – is also felt in the portrayal of Elsa Lichtman as the game's primary *femme fatale*, a victim there to serve as a plot device, having little to no power to control or manipulate her own fate.

Just as Rockstar deliberately occupy the role of developer-historian, their games are self-consciously historiographical. Branded as 'satire' or 'cultural history', they reflect wider historical knowledge and sell it back to globalised audience. Moreover, their promotional discourses are equally as deliberately historiographical. By occupying a pedagogical tone, they reassert the primacy of a filmic version of America's past and cinema history. In doing so, they implicitly canonise texts which reaffirm conservative historiographic movements and modes of thought, particularly concerned with America's West. Rockstar are historian, and their trans-historical 'school' is made up of other historically-minded filmmakers or writers that share their same sensibilities and outlook on America's past: Clint Eastwood, Sam Peckinpah, Cormac McCarthy, Brian DePalma, James Ellroy, and more.

It is of little wonder then that women should be marginalised by *RDR*'s and *LAN*. But we might question to what extent these issues are a symptom of a wider period of cultural backlash. This has been felt and expressed especially within the games industry

and gaming community in recent years. After all, both games were released only a few years before GamerGate forced into the spotlight the way disgruntled gamers were (and continue to be) hostile to the increased visibility of women, queer perspectives, and people of colour in games criticism and culture.[32] Even as recently as 2018, the inclusion of women in historical game spaces that threatened to disrupt 'authenticity' drew vitriolic backlash from online communities.[33]

Moreover, given Houser's above comments on historical facts that would be 'deeply unpleasant' to engage with and attempt to represent in *RDR2*, it is worth briefly reflecting on an area that was omitted from consideration in this thesis, yet is conspicuous in its absence. People of colour did not feature prominently in *RDR*'s nor *LAN*'s promotional discourses. Where references to people of colour exist, they are above all indirect: for example, the way that *RDR*'s physical map characterises the game's Mexican province as exotic and unknown, or that *Wild Wild West* – which cast Will Smith as its lead – was not an acceptable Western 'recommendation'.[34] While neither overtly references racial difference, their utility to *RDR*'s intertextual surround are interesting: in both cases, these geographical spaces and cultural products are *othered*. Implicitly then, whiteness was normative in the promotional constructions of America's past.

While there is a reasonable richness of scholarly work on the *GTA* series that explores the racialised representations of America the series offers,[35] comparatively little exists for *RDR* and *LAN*. Though this is certainly something that this study intends to

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[32] For an academic overview of the events of GamerGate and their connection to geek or hegemonic masculinity, see for example Andrea Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016): 1–10; Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate', *Games and Culture* 13, no. 8 (2018): 787–806; Chess and Shaw, 'A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying about GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity'.

[33] For example, the widely controversial release of a trailer for DICE's *Battlefield V* (2018) included a British woman with a prosthetic arm fighting on the front lines with male counterparts, leading to a backlash on social media, as well as many attempts to 'correct' misconceptions that women were not present in these otherwise-male coded historical spaces. See for example Megan Farokhmanesh, '*Battlefield V* Fans Who Failed History Are Mad That the Game Has Women in It', *The Verge*, 24 May 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/5/24/17388414/battlefield-v-fans-game-women-world-war-2-history [accessed 15 November 2018]; Tracy King, 'Yes, *Battlefield V* Gamers, There Were Female Soldiers in World War II', *NewStatesman*, 25 May 2018, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/games/2018/05/yes-battlefield-v-gamers-there-were-female-soldiers-world-war-ii [accessed 15 November 2018]; Esther Wright, '*Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire* and *Battlefield V*: The Real History behind 3 Popular Video Games', *History Extra*, 20 November 2018, https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/red-dead-redemption-l-a-noire-and-battlefield-v-the-real-history-behind-3-popular-video-games/ [accessed 20 November 2018].

[34] 'A Rockstar Recommends Recap: Our Favorite Westerns – And Yours'.

[35] See for example Higgin, 'Play-Fighting: Understanding Violence in Grand Theft Auto III'; Barrett, 'White Thumbs, Black Bodies'; Leonard, 'Virtual Gangstas, Coming to a Suburban House Near You: Demonization, Commodification, and Policing Blackness'; David Leonard, '*Grand Theft Auto V*: Post-Racial Fantasies and Ferguson Realities', in *The Intersectional Internet*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M Tynes (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 128–47; Krüger, 'Facing Fanon'.

account for in future, here it will serve to say this: Rockstar have a tendency to evoke historical events (such as The Zoot Suit Riots, for one, as noted in chapter five) or wider colonial processes (such as 'Indian Removal' and Native American genocide) in a way that separates, and ultimately removes them from their broader historical context. Much like the use of 'the Black Dahlia' murder to signal a wider, unspoken 'truth' about life in post-war American society, deeply racialised historical moments are used as short-hand for a company wanting to perform their role as historian, but reducing the process of doing so down to the lowest common denominator.[36]

In exploring these issues and using Rockstar as a case study I have intended to demonstrate that what is at stake, in terms of any game's historical representation, becomes clearer or complicated by moving our gaze to the peripheries of the text, and investigating what kind of information players could bring to their gameplay experience, as well as companies' efforts to manage and control what they want players to think about and perceive as authentic. Though beyond the scope of this thesis, we might use this information to study the way players interact with or receive official communication – their acceptance or resistance to the historical meanings offered in promotional discourses. Indeed, this is not intended to diminish the kinds of historical interpretations or representations created or managed by the 'player-historian.'[37] Players' opinions on a game's historical accuracy, or their resistance to the messages and meanings they offer, can form just as vital a part of a games' paratextual discourse as those curated and managed by developers.[38] But it is here argued that player-focussed studies can be complemented by studies of industry-generated discourse that interrogate the messages a

[36] This is something that some have argued was improved in the case of *RDR2*. Some noted that the inclusion of African American cowboys – in both the Van Der Linde gang and the game's wider world – was a welcome progression from *RDR*, which failed to represent the realities of Black Cowboy life even in the slightest. Yet the actual incorporation of African American men and women into the game's narrative was far from as virtuous as promotional images might have suggested. See for example Robert Whitaker and Esther Wright, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, History Respawned, accessed 16 December 2018, https://soundcloud.com/historyrespawned/episode-50-red-dead-redemption-2 [accessed 16 December 2018]; Moreover, the representation of Native Americans was similarly decried as Rockstar's use of 'redface', when it was discovered that the voice actor for the character of half-black/half-Native American gang member Charles Smith was neither Indigenous nor African American. While two other prominent Native American actors lent their voices to other Indigenous characters, the actor who voiced Smith, Noshir Dalal, is of Japanese and Parsi descent. Dia Lacina, '*Red Dead Redemption 2*'s Redface Proves How Far Games Haven't Come', *Paste Magazine*, 30 November 2018, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2018/11/red-dead-redemption-2s-redface-proves-how-far-game.html [accessed 30 November 2018]. A marketing discourse and narrative that superficially virtue-signals toward inclusivity is not, it would seem, a substitute for meaningful historiographical engagement.

[37] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*.

[38] As argued, for example, in Apperley, 'Counterfactual Communities'.

particular developer presents, rather than relying on the texts themselves as the only source of analysis. These approaches need not be mutually exclusive.

Though the study at hand was intended to serve as foundational and exploratory, the ultimate goal should be a more comprehensive analysis that considers the promotion of historical games broadly. It should situate Rockstar within the wider matrix of the market for historical games, and how the broad themes and discourses identified here correspond to or oppose the marketing strategies employed by other developers and publishers. What kind of role does branding – of a company or individual franchise – play in the paratextual and textual representation of history in certain games? How do these two realms of potential meaning making interact to create value, historicise their affordances, or connote 'authenticity'?

There are also issues to be considered concerning the ephemerality of these materials, as other scholars have noted. This is an unavoidable limitation of the study at hand, as well as studies of historical video game paratexts and promotion in general. There are few archives for media sources such as these, and we will likely never be able to build a complete archive of paratexts surrounding the release of any game published even a handful of years ago. Feature articles, press releases, and/or reviews – in print media or online – have become obsolete in the time since the release of these games in 2010 and 2011, and we will never be able to now catalogue all of the ephemeral, temporally-specific ways in which Rockstar marketed the games, or how individual retailers did.[39] We know that they existed, but we no longer have the particulars of what they were or how people responded to them.[40] These issues are not unique to Rockstar, nor to the games industry.[41] But it is not an insurmountable challenge to overcome, nor is it likely we could entirely capture and archive all of the many, sometimes opposing industry and fan discourses

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[39] Moreover, there are issues with using databases like Nexis to find this information: most of the online gaming and entertainment press websites that featured developer interviews and exclusives are not catalogued by the site.

[40] While the selection of source material for this study was intended to be representative, not impossibly comprehensive, even in the time spent undertaking this research many sources of potential future study were irretrievably lost. In 2016, the official Rockstar website underwent significant build changes. This altered the format of their *Newswire* posts, and some embedded videos, hyperlinks and poll data contained in certain posts had rotted or become inactive. More crucially, this update wiped the comments sections beneath individual posts like those in the 'Rockstar Recommends' or history-focussed series'. This therefore removed a wealth of content in which fans responded to Rockstar's 'recommendations', had active question and answer interactions with Rockstar, or otherwise actively communicated and participated with these Rockstar-designed paratexts.

[41] Many scholars have pondered the issue of ephemerality concerning the wider media. See for example Paul Grainge, ed., *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Cultures from Television to YouTube* (London: British Film Institute, 2011); Sara Pesce and Paolo Noto, eds., *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media: Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

surrounding these titles. It does suggest however that scholars should be mindful of these issues and pay attention to the promotional and paratextual surround of forthcoming historical video games from the earliest possible moment, or to the greatest extent possible for those that already exist.

To conclude, I would say that there is something prescient about the way that *RDR2* – like most Rockstar titles – has been praised for its intricacies of details, and the labour undertaken to create them. That Rockstar spend so much time and energy creating games, making choices, crafting historical narratives and worlds is apparent, as is their effort to create and curate promotional materials to claim authenticity. But an obsession with certain details that generate spectacle and the illusion of authenticity allows us to question what these choices tell us about contemporary collective knowledge of the past. If video games are condemned to tell history by way of popular culture's previous images of it, then why not *other* pop images of it? Put another way, if Rockstar dedicated as much time to making more inclusive games as they do exclusive ones, taking advantage of their status as 'outsider' or market leader to do so, and using their power to tell players – paratextually or otherwise – that these underrepresented stories are also authentic, then what histories could they, and we, possibly imagine?

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