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How video games reflect a discourse about
another era?

The case of *Red Dead Redemption II*

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en vue de l'obtention du grade de
Master en Communication Multilingue, à
finalité économique et sociale

Année académique 2018 - 2019

REMERCIEMENTS

I would like to thank all the people who helped me write this thesis.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my promoters, Mrs. Fanny Barnabé and Mrs. Marie Herbillon, for their interest in the subject, for their advice, their precious help and the support they have given me during the elaboration of this work.

I also thank my mother, father and brother, for their daily support, my relatives, and more particularly Amélie, for the invaluable help she gave me during the writing of this work and for her unfailing words of encouragement.

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General Introduction

Whether we want it or not, video games are definitely part of our culture and are constantly reaching an ever wider audience. It is interesting to see that, during the last few years, academics also had an increased interest in this medium and they still have.

Games are very varied and can go from very simple games such as *Tetris* (Aleksei Pajitnov, 1984), where the player has to stack blocks in the best possible way, to open world action games such as *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2006) and *Red Dead Redemption II* (Rockstar Games, 2018), in which the player can find various missions and many places to explore. What is really interesting with many games is that they are able to convey ideologies, ways of thinking and discourses. As we will see throughout this work, they are what Ian Bogost calls “an expressive medium” and they manage to do so thanks to different elements unique to them.

We will tackle more particularly the case of *Red Dead Redemption II* that came out in October 2018. The game plunges the player into the Far West, at the very beginning of the XXth century. Although the game is set more than hundred years ago, we will see that it still includes modern values that were not especially found at that time. The game manages thus to say something about a period of time that is not his.

To that end, we will first examine the specific features of our object of study. We will thus examine the different dimensions linked to *RDR2*, namely: its type of game, narratology, ludology, the notions of rules, gameplay and many more. We will define each element and examine it more thoroughly to establish a first solid theoretical basis.

Afterwards, this first chapter will open the way to the heart of our research, which regards the questions of ideology and discourse. Indeed, we will be particularly interested in these notions and more precisely how video games manage to use them. We will begin by defining the concept of discourse itself, and we will then move on to the procedural rhetoric of Ian Bogost, which is one of the key elements in this

research. We will then focus on ideology and stereotyping issues and we will see that we are subject to ideologies in our everyday life, thanks to the States Apparatuses of Louis Althusser.

Our last chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of various in-game moments, which feature specific discourses about our contemporary era. Since *Red Dead Redemption II* is one of the longest games ever created, we will base our analysis on relevant moments that are important for our study. We will choose the most interesting scenes, which say a lot about society we live in. The questions of feminism, race, and animal condition will be tackled by the game and we will analyze how a discourse is conveyed using different elements inherent in video games at the same time. We will have examined these different elements and mechanics beforehand. We will also see how *Red Dead Redemption* manages to remediatize stereotypes and, at the same time, how it deconstructs some of them.

Part 1: the specific features of *Red Dead Redemption II*¹

1. Introduction

Nowadays, it would be very difficult to deny that many video games convey any judgments or discourses about a specific topic or, in our case, another era. Ian Bogost, in his book “*Persuasive games: the expressive power of video games*” argues that:

Video games are an expressive medium. They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them.²

The objective of this work will be to study how a video game, and in this case, *Red Dead Redemption II* carries a discourse about another era. We will see that this game (like many others) answers to a system of values expressed by rules but not only. Indeed, there are many more aspects that need to be taken into account such as: the script, the music, the graphical representations, the texts etc. The game depicts a fictional universe taking place in the very beginning of the XXth century, and the premise is to say that this world tells us something about the contemporary universe we live in. Consequently, we will see that through its narrative but also through the way in which the player interacts with the gameplay universe, many video games give their vision of the world.

This very first chapter will be dedicated to the specific features of *Red Dead Redemption II*. It will be first relevant to tackle the production company and to analyze how the game was developed and in what context of production. For example, as we will see, a game produced in Japan will not have the same features as a game produced in the United-States. This example leads the way to the next point that will be discussed in this chapter, which regards the American video games and which particular features can be found in these. Afterwards, after tackling the global features of Rockstar’s latest achievement to date, emphasis will be placed on the game itself and more particularly on what kind of game is *Red Dead Redemption II*.

¹ Since the name of the game will often come back in this paper, we will often choose to use the abbreviation of *Red Dead Redemption II* namely “RDR2”.

² Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p.7.

Then, we will discuss the narratological and ludological aspects of the game. We will establish the theoretical framework of these concepts and how they will be of paramount importance in our research. Finally, a comparison between the features of games and movies will be established.

1.1 Rockstar Games

As mentioned above, this thesis will mainly tackle one of Rockstar's biggest time-consuming achievements in video games namely: the second opus of *Red Dead Redemption* that came out in October 2018 with more than 23 million copies shipped to retailers. However, before taking a deeper look at this new video game production, it would be interesting to analyze the characteristics of its production company. Indeed, analyzing the production company will tell us many things about the game itself.

To begin with, Rockstar Games is an American game publisher and developer founded in 1988 by two British brothers, Sam and Dan Houser. The company is known for having:

Given some of the most innovative and successful games to the industry, including the Grand Theft Auto, Red Dead, Max Payne and Midnight Club. The company is a subsidiary of Take-Two Interactive Software, and believes in developing games not only for kids, but for mature gamers too. In addition to the games developed by them, they are widely known for their use of the open world, and free roaming settings within their games.³

The two brothers managed to capture the attention of a wide audience thanks to “the originality and provocative nature of their games.”⁴ The GTA license for example allows the player to embody an outlaw in a modern city where he is promised to be able to do whatever he wants but to the extent permitted by the game. It goes without saying that this promise is part of a marketing argument to generate the desire to buy the game. The GTA license actually includes many games in which the player is often a criminal, evolving in a metropolis, or even sometimes a state. He must carry out missions of all kinds for many people, to make a name for himself in the city.

³ SuccessStory, *Rockstar Games Successtory*, [online], <https://successtory.com/companies/rockstar-games> (accessed January 25, 2019).

⁴ Dominique Pinsolle, « Dans les cuisines de Rockstar Games », in *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2018, [online], <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2018/12/PINSOLLE/59332> (accessed February 25, 2019).

Red dead Redemption I & II obviously follow the same pattern, with the difference that the player has an “honor gauge” that he can respect (or not). Killing innocent people will grant him bad honor whereas helping homeless people will raise his gauge in a positive way. We will come back on this notion of honor later in this work because it also plays a role in the discourse.

Furthermore, what is really interesting with Rockstar is how much effort they put into their games, which are to some degree considered by many people as works of art. Such work requires huge investments, but the production costs are quickly covered with the release of the game. *GTA V* for example cost 265 million dollars to make but reached one billion dollars of revenue in three days.⁵ The costs of production of such games can be compared with those of the film industry. The ten most expensive films in history cost between 230 million and 485 million dollars. However, behind the success of such games lies a darker reality. In the weeks before the release of *Red Dead Redemption II*, Dan Houser claimed that his employees had to work around hundred hours a week.⁶ We can see here very clearly that the working conditions are sometimes disastrous, and that the success of a game is often made at the expense of the developers’ well-being. The practice of “crunch”, which is the time overrun in the looping phase of a game, highlights the darker side of the video game industry. It is therefore interesting to keep this aspect in mind.

1.1.1 Almost eight years of development

The release of the *Red Dead Redemption* suite can be seen as an event in the video game world since it is the game that has required the largest amount of work in the history of video games. After eight years of development, the efforts and hours of work of the developers are no longer to be counted and this is one of the reasons why many players expected the game to be very detailed and complete.

⁵ Gary Assouline, « Pourquoi Red Dead Redemption 2 est plus démesuré qu’un blockbuster ? », in *Le Huffington post*, October 25, 2018, [online], https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/10/25/pourquoi-red-dead-redemption-2-est-plus-cher-qu-un-blockbuster_a_23570445/ (accessed February 27, 2019).

⁶ William Audureau, « La difficile question de la charge de travail dans l’industrie du jeu vidéo », in *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 18, 2018, [online], https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2018/10/18/la-difficile-question-de-la-charge-de-travail-dans-l-industrie-du-jeu-vidéo_5371361_4408996.html (accessed May 5, 2019).

To give an order of ideas, the game includes: 500,000 lines of dialogues, more than 2,000 hours of motion capture, 700 vocal actors, 500 for the motion capture and 300,000 animations. These developers paid attention to many details with the objective to make the game as realistic as possible. There are many examples within the game of how these details contribute to the realism of the game and these are perfectly illustrated in this video.⁷ For example, the arrows the player shoots will continue to move after hitting a target. We saw it above; this extreme attention to details had a cost regarding the well-being of the developers. The completeness of the game can hardly be contested but the question of a hundred hours a week raises controversies. Although the game was received positively at first; we saw earlier that Rockstar was accused of participating in a "crunch culture" or of pushing staff to work overtime.⁸ *Red Dead Redemption* has already generated a lot of debates and ideological discourses regarding the working conditions of its developers. Ironically enough, ideology and discourse are two capital elements regarding the topic of this thesis. It must be said that many employees of the American company claimed that they were never forced to do extra hours. Dan Houser even added – once the controversy has become viral – that there were only four people in the company that worked a hundred hours a week, including him.

Given the completeness of the game and its huge scenario, many people expected *Red Dead Redemption II* to win the 2018 Game Awards but it was not the case as *God of War* did. However, the latest production of Rockstar won four prizes including “The Game Awards price for the Best Narration” which has a direct link with our study. We will also tackle the notion of “narration” in a video game in this first chapter.

1.2 American video games

Although the Houser brothers are British, their video games company is based in New-York. Every game edited by Rockstar is thus considered as being American.

⁷ “20 Insane details in Red Dead Redemption II”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhHFtp2c3jc> (watched February 27, 2019).

⁸ Kevin Webb, « Le studio derrière “Red Dead Redemption” et “Grand Theft Auto” est impliqué dans une controverse — voici ce qu’il y a à savoir », in *Business Insider*, October 19, 2018, [online], <https://www.businessinsider.fr/ce-qu-on-sait-rockstar-games-red-dead-redemption-controverse-2018> (accessed May 3, 2019).

This subchapter will be dedicated to the features that constitute many American video games. We will also see in what way this definition will be useful in this work.

In an interview published in *Hermès, La Revue n°62*, Gaël Seydoux⁹ discusses the specific features of games manufactured by the French, the Japanese and the American. Seydoux states first that:

La supériorité des Américains est à chercher dans un savoir-faire dérivé de la grande tradition hollywoodienne : ils font montre d'une grande rigueur dans des mises en scène ambitieuses, riches d'effets spéciaux, et savent immerger les joueurs dans des jeux d'action spectaculaires tout en soignant chaque détail. Leurs jeux de guerre dérivent des films à grand budget et, de même, les jeux portant sur le grand banditisme se placent dans la veine du Parrain ou de Heat, ce film avec Robert de Niro et Al Pacino [...] Les Américains sont vraiment les as du film et du jeu d'action, de guerre et de grand banditisme. Il faut de colossaux budgets et un sens accompli de la mise en scène pour passer maître dans la réalisation de tels produits.¹⁰

This quotation is perfect for our object of research, *Red Dead Redemption II*, and its production company. Many games made by Rockstar, whether we are talking about the GTA license, *Vice City* or more particularly *Red Dead Redemption II*, refer to widespread banditry, to shootings, etc. In addition, Olivier Mauco, in his book *GTA IV: L'envers du rêve américain* notes that:

Toutes leurs productions (Rockstar) répondent à ce même principe: mise en scène d'un anti-héros confronté à un territoire régi par des clans, avec une intrigue prenant place dans un monde fictionnel empruntant aux réalités sociales ou aux univers familiers du public.¹¹

⁹ Former project manager at Ubisoft.

¹⁰ Gaël Seydoux, « La spécificité culturelle des jeux vidéo fabriqués par les Français, les Japonais et les Américains », in *Hermès la revue*, n° 62, 2012, p. 155. Available online on Cairn info. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2012-1-page-154.htm>.

“The superiority of Americans is to be found in a know-how derived from the great Hollywood tradition: they show great rigor in ambitious productions, rich in special effects, and know how to immerse players in spectacular action games while taking care of every detail. Their war games are derived from high-budget films and, likewise, games about widespread banditry are in the vein of the Godfather or Heat, these films with Robert de Niro and Al Pacino [...] Americans are really the masters of not only films but also action, war and big banditry games. It takes huge budgets and an accomplished sense of direction to become a master in the production of such products.” (pers. trans.)

¹¹ Olivier Mauco, *GTA IV : l'envers du rêve américain, jeux vidéo et critique sociale* (Quercy, Editions Questions Théoriques), 2013, p.10.

“All their productions (Rockstar) follow the same principle: staging of an anti-hero confronted with a territory governed by clans, with a plot taking place in a fictional world borrowing from social realities or the familiar universes of the public.” (pers. trans)

As mentioned before, their games feature many staging, cut scenes and it is very important to note the cinematographic cultural appropriation in their video games. The link between cinema and video games will be tackled further in this chapter. Each of these elements is relevant because it allows us to talk about another era, and the discourse it carries is rarely uninfluenced by its context of production.

1.2.1 Open world action/adventure games

In order to understand how a video game can tell us something about another era, it is also important to examine the type of game that is a part of our object of study. The latest production of Rockstar Games defines itself as an “action/adventure open world game.”¹²

To begin with, an “open world game” is, according to *Gamepedia*, a “type of video game where a player can roam freely through a virtual world and is given considerable freedom in choosing how or when to approach objectives [...] It suggests nonlinear gameplay with the absence of artificial barriers, in contrast to the invisible walls and loading screens that are common in linear level designs.”¹³ These open world games can be opposed to games such as *Call of Duty* for example, where the player has a definite unit of location for each mission, allowing the territories of the action to be multiple.¹⁴

Basically, it means that the player can move in the virtual world and perform actions to the extent allowed by the game. On the one hand, the world surrounding him will be affected by his actions but on the other hand, he will also be affected by the environment. For example, in the case of *RDR2*, the player can be wandering throughout the map with his horse and suddenly see someone on the side of the road shouting for help. He can get off the horse to find out what is going on and it appears that the man was bitten by a venomous snake. The game provides you with four different possibilities. The player can choose to help the poor man and give him an

¹² *Guide de Red Dead Redemption 2*, November 5, 2018, [online], <https://www.gamekult.com/jeux/red-dead-redemption-2-3050790185/guide.html> (accessed March 3, 2019).

¹³ Codex Gamicus, *Open-world video games*, [online], https://gamicus.gamepedia.com/Open-world_video_games (accessed March 7, 2019).

¹⁴ Olivier Mauco, *GTA IV : l'envers du rêve américain, jeux vidéo et critique sociale* (Quercy, Editions Questions Théoriques), 2013, p. 33.

item called “a tonic” that will make him survive or try to suck up the venom. If the player does not want the NPC to live, he can choose to leave and let him die or, as a last option, he can decide to put the man out of his misery and kill him himself.

Whether you choose one of these four options, the game will be affected by the decision that was just made. If the player chose you help the guy, he will find him restored in the nearby city where he will come to you and say thank you by giving the player whatever he wants at the gunsmith or at the grocery store. On the contrary, letting him die will not let the player have the chance to see him again, but the player will encounter other people with the same problem during his journey, and it is the player’s decision to save them or not. The honor gauge will also be affected by the choices that the player makes. Killing him or letting him die will grant the player bad honor whereas helping will make his honor rise in a positive way.



Figure 1: We can see here the different choices the player can make in a particular situation.

However, we must add that there is an opposition between what you can do when you are free roaming and when you are doing missions but we will discuss this opposition more deeply in Chapter 2.

We already tackled the notion of “open world” but we still have to analyze the notions of “action & adventure” which can be defined as such:

Action-adventures require many of the same physical skills as action games, but also offer a storyline, numerous characters, an inventory system, dialog, and other features of adventure games. They are faster-paced than pure adventure games, because they include both physical and conceptual challenges. Action-adventure games normally include a combination of a series of complex story elements made into an audio-visual display for players that is heavily reliant upon the player character's movement which affects the flow of the game.¹⁵

This definition adds new information regarding the one given by Mr. Seydoux about American video games. The slow-paced nature of the game is directly part of legacy of such adventure games and this feature is by the way often not only by the players but also by the critics who considers it as being one of the flaws of the game. It was also argued that the attention to details was paid to the detriment of dynamism¹⁶ but it will not have any impact on our study.

2. The features of the game object

After tackling the specificities of *Red Dead Redemption II*, it is necessary to focus on a broader concept, namely: the concept of video game and what it includes. Dissecting this concept will be important in our study because it will help us encircle how a video game can tell us something about another period of time. We will discuss each one of these different aspects further in this chapter. As mentioned by Pierre-Yves Hurel in Master's thesis, *Analyse idéologique des jeux video: une méthode ludo-narrative pour les jeux mis en récits*, we can find ideological elements within two different levels, namely: the gameplay and the narrative elements. This part of the first chapter will thus be dedicated to the different aspects of *RDR2* that play a role in the construction of an ideological discourse. We will tackle the notions of rules, gameplay, narration and the elements they include. To do so, we will base our research on different thesis and books and thus, not only will the thesis of Fanny Barnabé and Pierre-Yves Hurel be particularly relevant in our approach, but the works of Sébastien Genvo, Rémi Cayatte, Aki Järvinen, Marc Lits, Olivier Mauco and Yves Chevaldonné will be of paramount interest.

¹⁵ Definitions and Translations, *Definitions for an adventure game*, [online], <https://www.definitions.net/definition/action-adventure+game> (accessed March 3, 2019).

¹⁶ Emilien Maubant, « Red Dead Redemption 2 : pourquoi le jeu ne plaît pas à tout le monde malgré les excellentes critiques », in *Gentside*, October 29, 2018, [online], https://gaming.gentside.com/red-dead-redemption-2/red-dead-redemption-2-pourquoi-le-jeu-ne-plait-pas-a-tout-le-monde-malgre-les-excellentes-critiques_art26864.html (accessed March 8, 2019).

2.1 The ludo-narrative conflict

Before analyzing both the video game and narrative aspect in *Red Dead Redemption II* and how these elements will play a key role in our research, it is relevant to mention the conflict that existed between narratologists and ludologists. We have seen it in this first part, this work will be dedicated to analysis of the means that are used by *RDR2* in order to reflect a discourse about our era. Since these means involve different elements of the game, such as its gameplay, narration or even different representations, we must first acquire the necessary theoretical tools to describe and analyze these different facets of the video game. Therefore, we must first establish a solid theoretical frame that will serve as a base in order to discuss these different aspects.

Although this opposition belongs to the past, it is interesting to state that narration in video games caused a lot of ink to be spilled. In the game studies field, the relations between gameplay and narration were the heart of numerous debates among researchers. Markku Eskelinen¹⁷ in his article “The Gaming Situation” rejects the idea of games carrying a narrative and considers them as being simulation systems. In her Master’s thesis *Narration et jeux video : pour une exploration des univers fictionnels*, Fanny Barnabé notices:

Selon les narratologues, le jeu vidéo met en place une nouvelle forme de récit pour l’analyse duquel les études littéraires et cinématographiques peuvent fournir certains outils. Les ludologues, au contraire, partent du constat que la narrativité n’est pas une caractéristique intrinsèque du jeu vidéo (puisque tous les jeux ne contiennent pas nécessairement de récit) et que l’essence de ce médium se situe plutôt dans son interactivité.¹⁸

The narrativity of *Red Dead Redemption II* is indisputable (we saw it in the beginning of this work; the game has won a price for best narration). Olivier Mauco also illustrates how narration in *Red Dead Redemption II* cannot be contested by using *GTAIV* as an example. Indeed, *GTAIV*, as well as *RDR2*, both include many

¹⁷ Independent scholar and experimental writer of ergodic prose and critical essays. He still belongs to the ludological side.

¹⁸ Fanny Barnabé, *Narration et jeux video: Pour une exploration des univers fictionnels*, University of Liège, Belgium, 2014, p.13.

“According to narratologists, video games are introducing a new form of narrative for the analysis of which literary and cinematographic studies can provide some tools. However, ludologists start from the observation that narrativity is not an intrinsic characteristic of video games (since not all games necessarily contain a narrative) and that the essence of this medium lies rather in its interactivity.” (pers. trans.)

cut-scenes that precisely tell the story of the game. In his book *GTAIV: l'envers du rêve américain*, he states the following:

Grand Theft Auto IV est un jeu d'action dans un environnement urbain, caractérisé par une place importante accordée au scénario, en raison de nombreuses scènes cinématiques indiquant les objectifs à accomplir et raconte en même temps une histoire. Les modes d'action dans GTA IV sont inclus dans une trame scénaristique [...]. Cette trame est constituée d'un récit global, lui-même composé d'un ensemble de chapitres: les missions du jeu. Chaque mission se décompose en cinématiques et en phases d'action.¹⁹

This statement can thus also be applied to *RDR2* since the game gives an important place to the scenario. Indeed, the game includes many hours of cut scenes and definitely tells a story about a group of outlaws willing to earn enough money to live peacefully.

However, we have to be careful because it does not mean that the player will play the game as a narrative experience. This is one of the reasons why it was difficult to decide on the narrativity in video games. Given the specific features of the medium (to name just a few: the rules, the freedom of action and the interactivity), a very wide variety of experience can be produced. Mathieu Triclot, in his book *Philosophie des jeux vidéo* explains that the game generates a form of experience:

Le jeu engendre une forme d'expérience, non pas une « expérience nue », mais une « expérience instrumentée » qui se déploie dans la relation à l'écran. Le jeu existe comme un état intermédiaire, à mi-chemin entre le joueur et la machine, un état plutôt qu'un objet, un état altéré, un état second. [...] Les jeux relèvent d'une certaine forme d'expérience instrumentée, qui se nourrit de l'ordinateur, de l'écran et de toute une gamme de périphériques pour se mettre en marche.²⁰

¹⁹ Olivier Mauco, *GTA IV : l'envers du rêve américain, jeux vidéo et critique sociale* (Querzy, Editions Questions Théoriques), 2013, pp.29-30.

“*Grand Theft Auto IV* is an action game in an urban environment, characterized by an important place given to the scenario, due to many cinematic scenes indicating the objectives to be achieved and telling a story at the same time. The modes of action in GTA IV are included in a scenario framework [...]. This framework is made up of a global narrative, itself made up of a set of chapters: the missions of the game. Each mission is divided into cut scenes and action phases.” (pers. trans.)

²⁰ Mathieu Triclot, *Philosophie des jeux vidéo* (Éditions La Découverte, Paris), 2011, p.7.

“The game generates a form of experience, not a "naked experience", but an "instrumented experience" that unfolds in the relationship on the screen. The game exists as an intermediate state, halfway between the player and the machine, a state rather than an object, an altered state, a second state [...] Games are a form of instrumented experience, which feeds on the computer, the screen and a whole range of peripherals to get started.” (pers. trans.)

Therefore a player can have a narrative experience with a game that includes very little storytelling. For example, players can tell each other what happened in their games of *Minecraft* (Mojang, Markus Persson, Telltale Games, Xbox Game Studios, 4J Studios, Other Ocean Interactive, 2009) *Tetris* (Aleksei Pajitnov, 1984). On the contrary, *RDR2* can be played without paying attention to this aspect of the game. Indeed, there are speed runners who try to finish the game as rapidly as possible.

Consequently, the purpose of this thesis will not be to decide on whether players play or do not play the game as a narrative experience because it would require another type of study and another methodology. However, we will see how the narration, structurally present in the game concerned through its texts, cut scenes, characters and so on, establishes a political/ ideological discourse about our time.

Rémy Cayatte, in his thesis, *Les jeux vidéos américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique?*, sums today's situation perfectly:

Nous avons pu également démontrer que les jeux vidéo ne sont cependant pas que des expériences ludiques, mais qu'ils sont créés, et consommés comme des histoires, à l'exception notable de quelques rares jeux comme Tetris ou Gnometris.²¹

Despite this initial opposition, narration and video games are in fact constantly articulated. It is an opposition that will not be really structuring in the case of this thesis and we will see how all the elements of the game are involved in creating a discourse. Thus not only the narration but also the gameplay will be of great importance because they convey values and representations about our time.

2.2 The concept of video game

According to Hurel, the concept of video game can be subdivided into five categories²². The very first aspect that interests us is the “**information**”: it simply

²¹ Rémy Cayatte, *Les jeux vidéos américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique?*, University of Lorraine, France, 2016, p.235.

²² Pierre-Yves Hurel, *Analyse Idéologique des Jeux Vidéo, une méthode ludo-narrative pour les jeux mis en récits*, University of Liege, Belgium, 2011, p.26.

includes scores or statistics. This element can seem very trivial in our study but the information within a game can also carry information about another era simply by the names of the missions, for example. The game includes many side quests among which the player has to help a very eccentric British man, and the name of the mission is *Of course, he is British*. The name of the mission simply reinforces the eccentricity of the British in general but we will come back on this example later on in.

The second element regards the “**environment**”: according to Aki Järvinen, the environment “embodies the physical or virtual constraints of the game system, and as such it embodies rules that specify the spatial arrangement of a game.”²³

One of the most important categories that will help us in our analysis is the “**components**” They “reside within the game environment or are introduced there, and in case of a specific game environment (such as a board), player actions via game mechanics are enacted in relation to it.”²⁴ Also, “components are objects that the player is able to manipulate and possess in the course of the game. These objects are usually pieces, figurines, cards, credits, tools (weapons, keys, etc.).”²⁵ They are particularly important for our perspective because *Red Dead Redemption II* includes many components such as maps, letters, newspapers, etc. that inevitably carry values within them.

Moreover, the “**virtual interface**” that represents the player inside the game will also play a role of paramount importance in our study of *RDR2*. In our case, the virtual interface is mainly represented by the avatar named Arthur Morgan.

Lastly, the **characters** also have their importance. The world of *Red Dead Redemption* includes many characters that are unique. For the sake of this study, we

²³ Aki Järvinen, *Games without frontiers: Theories and Methods for Game Studies and Design*, doctoral dissertation study for Media Culture, University of Tampere, Finland, 2008, p.63.

²⁴ Ibid., p.66.

²⁵ Aki Järvinen, *Games without frontiers: Theories and Methods for Game Studies and Design*, doctoral dissertation study for Media Culture, University of Tampere, Finland, 2008, p.63.

will choose to only analyze the most relevant of them. Since our research will only focus on the solo mode, we will only be interested in the NPCs.²⁶

2.3 The Avatar

There is actually one character that distinguishes himself from the NPCs namely: the avatar. The avatar represents a very important of video games because he is controlled by the player himself. It is therefore of paramount importance to examine this element. To begin with, according to Fanny Georges, the concept of “avatar” is:

[...] habituellement utilisé pour désigner ces ensembles d’informations, ou personnages numériques, qui représentent les habitants des mondes virtuels. L’avatar, en tant qu’identité projective, est le produit de l’interprétation du joueur et, en tant que système techno sémiotique, est conditionné par l’interface.²⁷

Olivier Mauco also examines the role of the avatar in a video game in his book, *GTAIV: l’envers du rêve américain*. According to him:

Le héros est une interface diégétique et occupe une position intermédiaire entre interface de jeu et sujet d’une histoire : il est donc un outil mécanique et le protagoniste d’une fiction. L’avatar est un dispositif de contrôle qui permet de distribuer les actions du joueur.²⁸

The avatar is nowadays often associated with digital identity; it is a system of signs that replaces the body in virtual worlds.²⁹ In an interview with Oriane Deseilligny in the magazine *Hermès La Revue*, Frank Beau³⁰ discusses the issues of shaping identity and the argues that

L’enjeu de ce façonnage identitaire est à corrélérer avec l’économie des moyens et des fins sur laquelle reposent ces mondes, et dans laquelle l’avatar n’est

²⁶ Short for « non-player character ».

²⁷ Fanny Georges, « Avatars et identité », in *Hermès La Revue* n°62, 2012, p.33. Available online on Cairn info. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2012-1-page-33.htm?contenu=resume>.

“[...] usually used to refer to those sets of information, or digital characters, which represent the inhabitants of virtual worlds. The avatar, as a projective identity, is the product of the player's interpretation and, as a technosemiotic system, is conditioned by the interface.” (pers. trans.)

²⁸ Olivier Mauco, *GTA IV : l’envers du rêve américain, jeux vidéo et critique sociale* (Quercy, Editions Questions Théoriques), 2013, p.51.

“The hero is a diegetic interface and occupies an intermediate position between the game interface and the subject of a story: he is therefore a mechanical tool and the protagonist of a fiction. The avatar is a control device that allows you to distribute the player's actions.” (pers. trans.)

²⁹ Fanny Georges, « Avatars et identité », in *Hermès La Revue* n°62, 2012, p.34. Available online on Cairn info. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2012-1-page-33.htm?contenu=resume>.

³⁰ Frank Beau is an author, freelance journalist and expert on citizen participation issues.

qu'un moyen de communication et d'action [...] Il est l'interface et le moyen de capitalisation de l'expérience et de la capacité d'action du joueur. On voit dès ce stade que la notion d'avatar est distincte de celle d'identité numérique, car elle concerne le façonnage d'une présence spécifique à un média en réseau, à l'intérieur de laquelle peuvent se retrouver aussi bien des éléments définissant pour partie une identité réelle que des éléments « fictifs », propres à l'action poursuivie.³¹

Whereas Fanny Georges considers that avatar and digital identity go together, Frank Beau argues that digital identity and avatar are to be distinguished. In addition, Sébastien Genvo, in his article *Le rôle de l'avatar dans la jouabilité d'une structure de jeu vidéo* tackles some significant features of the video game avatar. He firstly discusses that the act of playing on a digital medium is a co-enunciation between the player and his representation. In a video game, this co-enunciation is shared between the game (what refers to the game structure) and the play (the player's playful attitude), both of these terms referring to "gameplay" analyzed in earlier in Chapter 1:

[...] l'avatar de jeu vidéo est avant tout à penser en termes de pouvoir-faire et de devoir-faire, l'impératif étant de guider le joueur dans son action de sorte qu'il sache ce qu'il doit faire au fur et à mesure de sa progression.³²

According to Sébastien Genvo, these first two elements are supported by the game system, which indicates to the player what he can or must do. Alongside these two skills, there are also the "vouloir-faire" and the "savoir-faire", which are directly related to the responsibility of the player, who is free or not to play and who must in order to do so, acquire certain know-how in the system handling. The avatar must thus be thought first and foremost as "pouvoir-faire" and "devoir-faire", because the

³¹ Oriane Deseilligny, Frank Beau, « Une figure du double numérique : l'Avatar », in *Hermès La Revue* n°59, 2009, p.42. Available online on Cairn info. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2009-1-page-41.htm>.

“The challenge of this identity shaping is to correlate with the economy of means and ends on which these worlds are based, and in which the avatar is only a means of communication and action [...] It is both the interface and the means of capitalizing on the player's experience and capacity for action. We see at this stage that the notion of avatar is distinct from the one of digital identity, because it concerns the shaping of a presence specific to a networked medium, in which we can find both elements defining in part a real identity and "fictional" elements, specific to the action being pursued.” (pers. trans.)

³² Sébastien Genvo, « Le rôle de l'avatar dans la jouabilité d'une structure de jeu vidéo », in *Adolescence* n°69, 2009, p.651. Available on Cairn info. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-adolescence1-2009-3-page-645.htm>.

“The video game avatar must be first and foremost thought in terms of power-do and duty-do, the imperative being to guide the player in his action so that he knows what he must do as he progresses. Nevertheless, the player's manipulation phase cannot always be didactic, especially since this phase must be frequently renewed, as the player discovers his objectives in a dynamic way.” (pers. trans.)

player has to be guided in his actions so that he knows what he has to do through his progression.³³

As we saw previously; it is the game structure that takes charge of the “devoir-faire” in delivering the objectives of the game. In *Red Dead Redemption*, the common objective that is shared is to make enough money to be able to live peacefully, far from the civilization. What is really interesting with the character of Arthur Morgan is that the game often lets you choose what you want to do and that the game will not continue if you do not make a decision. However, that is to be seen in main missions and not in free-roam as the “vouloir-faire” is up to the player.

We have thus here to deal with the avatar’s specific adequacy. There is a difference between “being” (namely the relation between power-to-do and duty-do) and “appearing” (the way it appears in a game). Sébastien Genvo gives us an example of what is meant by this adequacy with the example of Pac-man. In order to earn points, the player must eat dots scattered throughout the labyrinth. The purpose of the game is linked the appearance of the avatar, since he is represented as a yellow ball that focuses on orality.³⁴

To conclude, Sébastien Genvo argues that “being” and “appearing” do not always go together, and this phenomenon can be analyzed in the cut-scenes:

De nombreux jeux consacrent en définitive non pas le joueur, mais uniquement son avatar, lors d’une séquence « cinématique » (séquence filmique non interactive). Cette mise à distance du joueur permet de renforcer la jouabilité de la situation : « Celui qui s’engage dans une pratique qui, pour lui, présente forme et sens de jeu, est constamment prêt à s’en détacher, à s’en défaire. Ses actes s’en trouvent affectés d’une sorte de coefficient d’inanité. Il est ce héros, ce conquérant, ce séducteur ; en même temps il ne l’est pas, puisqu’il n’est que lui-même et qu’il joue.³⁵

³³ Sébastien Genvo, « Le rôle de l’avatar dans la jouabilité d’une structure de jeu vidéo », in *Adolescence* n°69, 2009, p.648. Available on Cairn info. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-adolescence1-2009-3-page-645.htm>.

³⁴ Sébastien Genvo, « Le rôle de l’avatar dans la jouabilité d’une structure de jeu vidéo », in *Adolescence* n°69, 2009, p.651. Available on Cairn info. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-adolescence1-2009-3-page-645.htm>.

³⁵ Ibid., p.652.

“Many games ultimately consecrate not the player, but only his avatar, in a "cut-scene" sequence (non-interactive film sequence). This distance allows the player to reinforce the playability of the situation: "Anyone who engages in a practice that, for him, presents form and sense of play, is constantly ready to detach himself from it, to get rid of it. Its actions are affected by a kind of

This quotation can easily be taken into account in our research since cut scenes are very much present in the game and also because they are a vector of ideology. The distance established between the player and his representation in a game is really meaningful about the ideology of the latter. The player has no control and cannot have an influence on the words that are said on the actions that are done during the cinematics.

Finally, Fanny Georges adds that avatars come in different shapes. In *Red Dead Redemption II*, Arthur Morgan is what is called an “avatar-marionette,”³⁶ which means that it is predefined before starting the game. It therefore does not let the player much place regarding customization, although you can personalize the clothes, guns and haircut of Arthur. Sometimes, the player gets attached to the character he is playing and he might also feel empathy for him. Fanny Georges explains:

Personnage emblématique, l’avatar, issu de licences de médias traditionnels (*Largo Winch, Donald*) ou de l’univers du jeu même (*Mario, Sonic, Lara Croft*), suscite un attachement affectif fort qui réside moins en son apparence qu’en sa manipulation fine (Ryu, 2010). Cette manipulation nécessite une identification empathique de la part du joueur, que ce soit plutôt en termes de contrôles des déplacements dans les jeux de plateforme qu’en termes d’adoption des objectifs du personnage dans les jeux d’aventure.³⁷

Red Dead Redemption II includes a very long story. We must not forget that cinematics are also there to put some distance between the player and the avatar. We will see how one of the main protagonists of our journey in *Red Dead Redemption* is a vector of ideology and how his thoughts are already in advance of his time.

coefficient of inanity. He is that hero, that conqueror, that seducer; at the same time he is not, since he is only himself and that he plays.” (pers. trans.)

³⁶ We can translate it as “Puppet-avatar” but we will choose to use the appellation “Avatar-marionette” for this study.

³⁷ Fanny Georges, « Avatar et identités », in *Hermès La Revue* n°62, 2012, p. 35. Available online on Cairn info. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2009-1-page-41.htm>. “The avatar, an emblematic character, comes from traditional media licenses (*Largo Winch, Donald*) or from the game world itself (*Mario, Sonic, Lara Croft*), and arouses a strong emotional attachment that resides less in his appearance than in his fine manipulation (Ryu, 2010). This manipulation requires an empathic identification on the part of the player, whether in terms of movement controls in platform games or in terms of adopting the character's objectives in adventure games.” (pers. trans.)

3. The notions of rules & gameplay

The rules defined by the game will also be of paramount importance. A player is never free to do whatever he wants to do. If the game tells the player to do something and that he has no other choice, a value will be transmitted. On the contrary, the game will often let us choose what we want to do, and consequently will be impacted by the decision the player just made. Ian Bogost gives an example of this transmission of value a game called *XIII*, which features a deprogrammed spy. Bogost states the following:

The game puts the player in the role of an amnesic secret agent of moral ambiguity. The narrative plays with that moral ambiguity, but in some sequences of the game, killing a police officer implies a game over, clearly determining the ethical values embedded in the main character.³⁸

This aspect of transmission of value will be further demonstrated in Chapter 2 as morality and faith play an important role in our study. The rules within a game will inevitably tell something about the values in it and they correspond to the notion of “game” in the concept of “gameplay”.

Sébastien Genvo, in his thesis *Le game design de jeux video : approche communicationnelle et interculturelle*, notices that the notion of “game” varies from a language to another. The French word « jeu » for example refers both to « un ensemble limité régit par un système de règle et à une certaine idée de liberté d’usage »³⁹ that can be translated as such: “a limited set governed by a system of rules and a certain idea of freedom of use”. Whereas English uses more the term “game” for the first aspect and “play” for the second one. There is a difference in the term whether we analyze it in French or in English. For the sake of this study, we will mainly focus on the English definition. Moreover, the relationship between “game” and “play” is unique and, according to Katy Salen and Eric Zimmerman, gameplay includes the combination of the two concepts, namely a freedom of space within a binding structure. Any game is a system of rules combined with a space of freedom within

³⁸ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games : The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p.284.

³⁹ Sébastien Genvo, *Le game design de jeux vidéo : approche communicationnelle et interculturelle*, University of Paul-Verlaine, France, 2006, p.144.

this system. « Katie Salen et Eric Zimmerman définissent-ils le terme comme un mouvement libre au sein d'une structure plus rigide. »⁴⁰

In conclusion, there is no doubt that “game” and “play” go together and that it is a structure of binding rules in which there is room for maneuver. These aspects will play a key role in our research. The components, characters, environment, information within the game tell us something about our contemporary society and we will demonstrate how in the following chapters. Such elements lie not only within the videogame concept but also within the narration which is what we will discuss right afterwards.

4. The narrative aspect

Yves Chevaldonné, in an article from *Hermès La Revue*, explains:

La question de la narrativité est au centre du jeu vidéo, tout comme des autres arts qui nous intéressent ici. On a souvent comparé le séquençage des BD à celui d'un jeu de plateformes, où les niveaux défilent le plus souvent horizontalement et vers la droite [...] Mais la principale caractéristique de la narration dans un jeu vidéo, c'est la dimension interactive.⁴¹

Alongside the five ludological elements we saw earlier (information, visual interface, environment, components and characters) there are also stories, cut scenes, characters' representations that contribute to the construction of a discourse, an ideology (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, the video game can also integrate narration within its system, gameplay, and thus combine narration with interactivity. Every element in the game participates in the narration of it. Here, we can clearly see that the border between these two concepts is permeable. A great illustration of these words can be found in Fanny Barnabé's Master's thesis in which she states:

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

“Do Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define the term as a free movement within a more rigid structure.” (pers. trans.)

⁴¹ Yves Chevaldonné, « Intertextualités : jeu vidéo, littérature, cinéma, bande dessinée », in *Hermès la revue*, 2012/1 n° 62, p.118. Available online on Cairn Info. URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2012-1-page-115.htm?try_download=1.

“The question of narrativity is at the heart of the video game, as it is of the other arts that interest us here. The sequencing of comics has often been compared to the one of a platform game, where the levels most often scroll horizontally and to the right [...] But the main characteristic of storytelling in a video game is the interactive dimension.” (pers. trans.)

La porosité entre ces deux concepts est assurée, dans les jeux vidéo narratifs, par différents éléments ayant à la fois une fonction interactive (ils ont un rôle à jouer dans l'organisation du jeu) et narrative (ils participent à construire un univers fictionnel et permettent ainsi aux événements du récit de se produire). Ces éléments peuvent appartenir à des niveaux très différents, allant du simple design des objets ou des personnages à l'organisation de l'interface ou même au paratexte [...]⁴²

We quickly saw, on the one hand, how the concepts of narration and ludology blend in together and how, on the other hand, the narration in a game also contributes to the transmission of ideas. We must extend the narratological aspect not only through the narrative, but also through the vision it gives of the world. In his Master's thesis, Pierre-Yves Hurel wonders if stories convey representations or values. He therefore uses a quote from Marc Lits⁴³ that is very significant in our study because it tackles the concept of "world view":

Les récits que nous recevons chaque jour, dont nous sommes bombardés par les divers médias qui nous environnent en permanence, construisent une certaine image de la société, donc de nous-mêmes. La vision du monde que nous nous approprions n'est que la somme des informations qui nous sont transmises par les divers discours médiatisateurs (en famille, à l'école, dans nos relations, notre travail, nos loisirs...)⁴⁴

Each story is thus bound to convey implicit values that are related to a definite worldview. The values conveyed by *RDR2* are the product of a layering world views. The superposition of the world views of, on the one hand, the developers and the decision-making bodies of the studio and, on the other hand, the players and the contemporary doxa. Because narratology and ludology are to be thought together, we can link to this narrative aspect the five elements we saw earlier when we talked about the video game concept in order to get a complete overview. We also saw that ludology as well as narratology are not impermeable concepts.

⁴² Fanny Barnabé, *Narration et jeux vidéo : pour une exploration des univers fictionnels*, University of Liege, Belgium, 2014, p.23.

"The porosity between these two concepts is ensured, in narrative video games, by different elements having both an interactive function (they have a role to play in the organization of the game) and a narrative function (they participate in building a fictional universe and thus allow the events of the story to occur). These elements can belong to very different levels, ranging from the simple design of objects or characters to the organization of the interface or even the paratext [...]" (pers. trans.).

⁴³ Pierre-Yves Hurel, *Analyse idéologique des jeux vidéo: Une méthode ludo-narrative pour les jeux mis en récits*, University of Liege, Belgium, 2011, p.50.

⁴⁴ Marc Lits, *Récit, médias et société*, (Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia AB Bruylant), 1996, p 137.

5. Movies & Video games

Yves Chevaldonné argues that video games lie at the center of a variety of cultural worlds: « Le jeu vidéo se trouve au cœur d'un nœud reliant les mondes imaginaires d'aujourd'hui : littérature, cinéma, bande dessinée et jeu de rôle sur table. »⁴⁵

It would be wrong to say that video games and cinema have nothing in common. Many years ago, Christophe Bombana, the former director of Atari (French video game company founded in 1972) said “the video game economy is getting closer and closer to the cinema economy.”⁴⁶ This became all the more true when Atari was bought by Warner Communication in 1976. In addition, we can note that the convergence between these two universes is not only financial but also involves teams of technicians. Peter Jackson for example asked Michel Ancel⁴⁷ for help with his adaptation of the film King Kong. The two environments definitely mix together.

The economic closeness between these two fields was obviously not without consequences as we can clearly notice that video games include many references to the cinematographic genre but there are also many more factors that explain this presence of Hollywood film references in the very first video games⁴⁸. As Alexis Blanchet mentions in his book *Des pixels à Hollywood, cinéma et jeux vidéo. Une histoire économique et culturelle*:

Tout d'abord, il y a des raisons culturelles et générationnelles concernant les premiers créateurs américains de jeux, tous plutôt jeunes, qui baignent dans un contexte culturel où règnent la contre-culture, la science-fiction, le jeu de rôle et le cinéma populaire.⁴⁹

Indeed, the very first creators of video games were full of cinematographic references mostly inspired by the Hollywood cinema and its narrative and visual

⁴⁵ Yves Chevaldonné, « Intertextualités : jeu vidéo, littérature, cinéma, bande dessinée », in *Hermès La Revue* n°62, 2012, p.115. Available online on Cairn Info. URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2012-1-page-115.htm?try_download=1.

“Video games are at the heart of a knot that connects today's imaginary worlds: literature, cinema, comics and tabletop role-playing.” (pers. trans.)

⁴⁶ Yves Chevaldonné, « Intertextualités : jeu vidéo, littérature, cinéma, bande dessinée », in *Hermès La Revue* n°62, 2012, p.115. Available online on Carin Info. URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2012-1-page-115.htm?try_download=1.

⁴⁷ Game Designer at Ubisoft.

⁴⁸ Alexis Blanchet, *Des pixels à Hollywood, cinéma et jeux vidéo. Une histoire économique et culturelle* (Châtillon, Pix'n love editions), 2010, p. 97.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 97.

codes. Auteurs such as J. R. Tolkien, who wrote *The Lord of the Rings* and *Bilbo the Hobbit*, had a considerable influence on the way quest-based scenarios were thought. Movies such as *Aliens*, *Excalibur* and *Star Wars* also had a paramount influence on these creators.⁵⁰ Consequently, we can deduce that the very first video games:

S’inspirent ainsi de genres cinématographiques ancrés dans l’imaginaire des joueurs et y activent le souvenir d’univers et de conventions, les mécanismes d’un récit rudimentaire, la reconnaissance de répertoires d’action pour la posture ludique : duel de cowboys, fusillades, courses-poursuites, etc.⁵¹

Moreover, these cinematographic references were definitely to be found in the very first video games but they are still to be seen nowadays. We will see that *Red Dead Redemption* also includes cowboy duels, shootings, chases, etc. *RDR2* generates many aspects that are still inspired by cinematographic genres.

There is thus no doubt that video games are part of a “transmedia” cultural network. We briefly saw that they borrow important codes from other arts, and more particularly from the cinema, to which it is very close. In his book, Alexis Blanchet manages to summarize the situation perfectly:

Le jeu vidéo emprunte facilement des éléments (style, structure de récit, stéréotypes et imaginaires) aux univers précodés et conventionnels des médias narratifs comme le cinéma, la bande dessinée, la littérature, ou à d’autres domaines tels que les jeux, les jouets ou les illustrations.⁵²

At the very beginning video games were relatively primitive, and had a very basic language but throughout the years, they began to borrow more and more codes from cinema and other forms of expression.⁵³

⁵⁰ Alexis Blanchet, *Des pixels à Hollywood, cinéma et jeux vidéo. Une histoire économique et culturelle* (Châtillon, Pix’n love editions), 2010, p. 97.

“First of all, there are cultural and generational reasons concerning the first American game creators, all rather young, who live in a cultural context where counter-culture, science fiction, role-playing and popular cinema prevail.” (pers. trans.)

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 99.

“Inspired by cinematographic genres rooted in the players’ imagination, they activate the memory of universes and conventions, the mechanisms of a rudimentary narrative, the recognition of action repertoires for the playful posture: cowboy duels, shootings, chases, etc.” (pers. trans.)

⁵² Alexis Blanchet, *Des pixels à Hollywood, cinéma et jeux vidéo. Une histoire économique et culturelle* (Châtillon, Pix’n love editions), 2010, p. 99.

“Video games easily borrow elements (style, story structure, stereotypes and imagination) from the pre-coded and conventional worlds of narrative media such as cinema, comics, literature, or from other fields such as games, toys or illustrations.” (pers. trans.)

⁵³ Yves Chevaldonné, « Intertextualités : jeu vidéo, littérature, cinéma, bande dessinée », in *Hermès La Revue* n°62, 2012, p.118. Available online on Cairn Info. URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2012-1-page-115.htm?try_download=1.

To begin with, we will analyze how Rockstar uses references to famous movies in their games and we will then examine the case of *Red Dead Redemption* in detail.

5.1 The GTA License

We already engaged the characteristics of the games made by Rockstar and how they gather considerable resources in order to create them but we must also add that since its creation, Rockstar has always been inspired by movies and cinematographic genres. As we saw, many video games are inspired by cultural references that can be found in movies for example. The GTA license, for example, includes many references to famous film productions. It is definitely to be seen in-game as the gameplay becomes a staging tool but we will come back to that aspect later on. *Les Inrocks*⁵⁴, in their article *Comment Rockstar Games s'est approprié la culture cinématographique dans ses jeux vidéo?*⁵⁵, notices that:

Les jeux vidéo Rockstar et le cinéma entretiennent une correspondance par une appropriation du premier des codes du second, tel un véritable jeu de références (et de ressemblances). Rockstar Games n'a cessé de s'inspirer du cinéma, à la fois dans la conception de ses personnages et des histoires, jusqu'à altérer le gameplay et la réalisation des cinématiques qui font l'objet de véritables mises en scène.⁵⁶

Oliver Mauco also adds that the GTA License « avant tout une nouvelle énonciation brassant et empruntant aux autres œuvres populaires. »⁵⁷ There are obviously links between *Red dead Redemption II* and cinema but the most symbolic “borrowings” are to be found in the GTA license. *GTAIII*, for example, allows the player to enter the closed world of the mafia. There are many similarities with movies such as “Le Parrain”. With *GTA Vice City*, we rather have links with “Scarface” since the player is following the same desires as Tony Montana, namely: rising in criminality, willingness to extend his empire... It goes without saying that *GTAIV* & *V* will also

⁵⁴ French magazine initially dedicated to rock but which became later more cultural and political.

⁵⁵ Quentin Billet-Garin, « Comment Rockstar Games s'est approprié la culture cinématographique dans ses jeux vidéo? », in *Les Inrocks*, October 26, 2018, [online], <https://www.lesinrocks.com/2018/10/26/jeux-vidéo/actualite-cinema/comment-rockstar-games-sest-approprié-la-culture-cinematographique-dans-ses-jeux-vidéo/> (accessed February 25, 2019).

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

“The games made by Rockstar manage to maintain a relation with cinema as the former appropriates the codes of the latter, like a real set of references (and similarities). Rockstar Games has never ceased to be inspired by cinema, both in the design of its characters and stories, to the point of altering the gameplay and the making of the cinematic films that are the subject of real staging.” (pers. trans.)

⁵⁷ Olivier Mauco, *GTA IV : l'envers du rêve américain, jeux vidéo et critique sociale* (Querzy, Editions Questions Théoriques), 2013, p. 37.

have their share of references but what really interests us in our study is the closeness between the western genre and *Red Dead Redemption II*.

5.2 Parallelism between *Red Dead Redemption II* and the cinematographic western



Figure 2: Analogy between the cover of *Red Dead Redemption* and the movie *The 7 Mercenaries*

In an interview for the magazine “LE TEMPS”, Dan Houser himself said that in order to prepare the first *Red Dead Redemption* game, he had to binge watch many western movies. The story of *Red Dead Redemption II* takes place before the first opus in between the very end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century. It goes without saying that many western codes are reused in both gameplay and cut scenes (that allow the story to make progress in a filmic way). We briefly discussed it earlier, the player is able to do many things such as participate in horse shootings, escape from bounty hunters, do typical cow-boy duels in the middle of towns, blow up bridges and hijack trains. These are the kind of actions that can be seen in very popular films such as *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968), *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966) and even *Django: Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2013).

We mentioned earlier that the gameplay was a staging tool and therefore here is one example of how this American game company manages to do so. In Chapter 4⁵⁸, the player will eventually have to do a mission called “Banking, the Old American Art” This is supposed to be the last big hit of Dutch’s group⁵⁹ before they leave the region and start a new life. However, things do not turn out as expected and many members of the group end up being trapped inside the bank. This mission stages a huge shooting, and involves many police officers, Pinkerton agents, an escape on rooftops and ends with a very long pursuit.⁶⁰ The video below perfectly illustrates these words.

The link with cinema becomes obvious as we play. Rockstar even allows the player to make his own movie. At 5.00min in the video below, we would think the player has no control over the main character but it is not the case. When the player has to travel long distances for example, the game will offer him the opportunity to switch to “cinema mode”. When doing so, the camera detaches from the classic third person view. The framing choices and the scripted nature of the scene suggest that it is a non-interactive cut scene, but this is not the case. The player can decide whenever he wants to regain the control of the character. The game allows the player to capture any action from any point of view as if he was a video camera. Everything is organized to make players believe that they are in a sort of movie. Not only is this feeling conveyed through the gameplay but also through the cut-scenes. For example, every time Arthur engages conversation with someone, the screen shrinks with the appearance of two horizontal black stripes that really participate in the elaboration of a “cinemascope” effect. These finally disappear when the interaction is over and that the player gets the control of the avatar back.

⁵⁸ The game is divided into 6 chapters and an epilogue.

⁵⁹ The Van der Linde gang is an outlaw gang featured in Red Dead Redemption 2 as the main protagonist faction.

⁶⁰ Red Dead Redemption 2 - Mission #57 - Banking, The Old American Art [Gold Medal], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJpMcR810-M> (watched May 14). The part that interests us starts at 5.00.



Figure 2.1: Here, the player has a full screen before the avatar starts the conversation



Figure 2.2 : Now that conversation has been engaged, the screen narrows

We saw it above, *Red Dead Redemption II* borrows many elements from cinema. However, cinema, as well as video games, are both what Louis Althusser calls the “Cultural State Apparatuses”, which will be more precisely discussed in Chapter 2. Cinema, for example, can be found in such institutions because it shares with video games the fundamental importance of storytelling and image. But, as we will see, video games differ from cinema in some of the ways in which they transmit an ideological discourse. Bob Rehak, in his article *Playing at Being* reminds us that cinema “has already been the subject of comparisons with the notion of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus.”⁶¹ Rehak also points out that the potential of film

⁶¹ Rémi Cayatte, *Les jeux vidéo américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique?*, University of Lorraine, France, 2016, p. 122.

discourse in the transmission of ideological elements may encounter problems that video games are able to overcome.

The game apparatus—a software engine that renders three-dimensional spaces from an embodied perspective, directed in real time by players through a physical interface—achieves what the cinematic apparatus cannot: a sense of literal presence, and a newly participatory role, for the viewer. Yet the question of ideological positioning is as pertinent to this new medium as it is to cinema. More so, in fact, because of video games' amplified effect on subjectivity and corresponding elision of authorship. The film spectator's role as an implied observer of narrative events—an “absent one” flickering ghostlike through the diegesis, positioned anew from shot to shot—is concretized in the video game imaginary through the figure of the avatar, a “present one” standing in for the player, who chooses the path of the camera-body with apparent freedom. The disavowal necessary to gameplay is like the “Yes, that's what I see” of successful cinematic suture, but goes further: it is “Yes, that's what I do.”⁶²

Video games are able to do many things that the cinema cannot. Bob Rehak argues that the possibility of an ideological transmission is more relevant between players and authors than between authors and spectators. This difference is due to a characteristic of video games that concerns the avatar. Video games are able to make the author's influence more transparent and less visible by offering players to see, but also to act. The avatar will be further tackled in Chapter 2.

5.3 Cut scenes

We briefly tackled the cut scenes earlier in this chapter but we have to discuss them more deeply since they are a very important aspect of the game. Rémi Cayatte argues that « la composante visuelle voire filmique des jeux vidéo, [...] participe à l'élaboration et à la transmission d'un discours en jeu. »⁶³ Yves Chevaldonné also addresses the definition of the cut scenes. He describes them as “one of the most emblematic figures of narrative in video games.”⁶⁴ He adds that the cut scenes'

⁶² Bob Rehak, “Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar”, in *The video game theory reader* 2003, p. 121.

⁶³ Rémi Cayatte, *Les jeux vidéos américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique?*, University of Lorraine, France, 2016, pp.121-122. “The visual or even filmic component of video games, [...] participates in the development and transmission of a speech in game.” (pers. trans.)

⁶⁴ Yves Chevaldonné, « Intertextualités : jeu vidéo, littérature, cinéma, bande dessinée », in *Hermès La Revue* n°62, 2012, p.118. Available online on Cairn Info. URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-hermes-la-revue-2012-1-page-115.htm?try_download=1.

functions are to used present the world and the characters, and to ensure the transition between two game phases.⁶⁵

Cut scenes mark a break in the interactivity as the player is usually less active because the game temporarily stops giving him opportunities for action or choice. Moreover, according to Fanny Barnabé, cut scenes introduce a back and forth movement that forces the player to regularly change his attitude towards the game universe. That way, he will be more able to understand the way he is orientated. The non-interactive moments allow the game to be rhythmmed because they introduce inaction periods that are for the player to “rest”. Cut scenes often appear after intense moments such as: a boss fight, the end of a level, etc.⁶⁶ Consequently, these cut scenes not only have a narrative role, they are directly part of the game mechanisms, constituting an award for the player. It is important to add that such scenes are used to highlight important events. Fanny Barnabé argues that:

Elles substituent donc à la tension créée par la difficulté du jeu une tension exclusivement dramatique, et constituent ainsi le point de rupture entre la ludiégèse (l’univers régi par le jeu) et la diégèse. En somme, par leur simple présence – et nous verrons qu’il en est de même pour les textes – ces séquences établissent pour le jeu une certaine structure narrative en divisant le récit en phases (la grande majorité des jeux s’ouvrent et se terminent d’ailleurs par une vidéo, ce qui témoigne de leur statut de limites).⁶⁷

However, more and more players and professionals are taking their distances from cinematics because some of them consider that it is really “frustrating” to be captive in game, watching without being able to do anything. This aspect of cinematics can clearly be linked with what was mentioned earlier when we tackled the comparison between cinema and video games.⁶⁸

Il est très agaçant d’être captif dans un jeu, c’est à dire de regarder une séquence dans un état de totale impuissance. Les séquences cinématiques [...] doivent être très courtes, maîtrisées, justifiées et placées au bon moment, et à

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁶ Fanny Barnabé, *Narration et jeux vidéo : pour une exploration des univers fictionnels*, University of Liege, Belgium, 2014, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Fanny Barnabé, *Narration et jeux vidéo : pour une exploration des univers fictionnels*, University of Liege, Belgium, 2014, p. 32.

“They therefore replace the tension created by the difficulty of the game with an exclusively dramatic tension, and thus constitute the breaking point between ludiegesis (the universe governed by the game) and diegesis. In short, by their simple presence - and we will see that it is the same for the texts - these sequences establish a certain narrative structure for the game by dividing the narrative into phases (the vast majority of games open and end with a video, which testifies to their status as limits.” (pers. trans.)

⁶⁸ Fanny Barnabé, *Narration et jeux vidéo : pour une exploration des univers fictionnels*, University of Liege, Belgium, 2014, p. 54.

intervalles éloignés. Qui a envie de rester cinq minutes dans son fauteuil sans toucher au paddle ?⁶⁹

Cut scenes say a lot not only about the narration of a game and the information that is related to it but also about the procedural rhetoric of the game, that we will tackle in Chapter 2. In addition, we will see in Chapter 3 that cut scenes sometimes do not let the player act where it should normally be possible to. Since the player has no control over his character during cut scenes, values and representations can be conveyed within them.

6. Conclusion

In this very first chapter of our study, we established the theoretical frame that will be useful in our analysis. We studied the different aspects of *Red Dead Redemption II* and more particularly the genre it is part of and we also examined the concepts of narratology and ludology since these two will have a key importance in our study. We also saw how video games share many things with cinema and how it remains still very different from it. In the upcoming chapters, we will analyze more deeply each aspect that creates a discourse and, consequently, we will also be interested in the notion of discourse and how video games are a political and ideological vector.

⁶⁹ Pierre Gaultier, *Jeux vidéo et cinéma*, [online], [http://polygonweb.\[online\].fr/cinema.htm](http://polygonweb.[online].fr/cinema.htm) (accessed May 18, 2019).

“It is very annoying to be captive in a game, i.e. to watch a sequence in a state of total powerlessness. Cut-scenes sequences [...] must be very short, controlled, justified and placed at the right time and at distant intervals. Who wants to stay in his chair for five minutes without touching the paddle?” (pers.trans.)

Part 2: Video games ideology and discourse

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we discussed the different aspects inherent in *Red Dead Redemption II* and how important they were to our study. Indeed, the ludo-narrative elements will help us discover which means are used in order to create a discourse about our contemporary time in this game. This upcoming chapter will be dedicated to the concepts of ideology and discourse: how can a game frame an ideology and what exactly do we mean by “discourse”? To do so, the procedural rhetoric of Ian Bogost will be of paramount importance. For a long time, video games were considered as “serving no cultural or social function save distraction at best, moral baseness at worst.”⁷⁰ It is no surprise today that the question of morality in video games often makes the front pages of newspapers since there are a lot of games that raise controversies. However, morality and faith also play a substantial role in the game mechanics. Many GTA games caused a lot of ink to be spilled and one of the reasons was because the player was able to wander throughout cities and kill citizens whenever he wanted to. We will also see that many video games do have persuasive power, which can be found in the processes of the game. The serious games movement⁷¹ for example, “has sought to create videogames to support existing social and cultural positions.”⁷² The serious games are not the only ones to have implemented such measures as all kinds of video games, including mass-market products (like *Red Dead Redemption II*), also manage to mount meaningful expression. Ideologies and discourses can be conveyed in a game through many game aspects that we tackled in Chapter 1, and these will be more thoroughly discussed in the upcoming pages.

⁷⁰ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. viii.

⁷¹ A Serious Game is a game that uses new technologies with the specific intention of conveying a message in an attractive way. This message can be educational, informative or even communicative, while having the playful aspect of a classic video game. Definition borrowed from <http://blog.seriousgame.be/definition>.

⁷² Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. ix.

2. Discourse

In her book *Analyser les discours institutionnels*, Alice Krieg-Planque writes:

Quiconque souhaite s'emparer du discours pour en mener l'étude trouve autour de lui une multitude de terrains et d'objets qui se prêtent à une telle investigation: le discours est au cœur de la vie politique et sociale. En chemin, bien souvent, cette enquête croise des activités d'information et de communication : celles-ci sont en effet avant tout discursives et symboliques.⁷³

We can agree with her statement as we are able to find discourses in many aspects of our everyday life. As this work will only focus on the study of discourse in video games, we will choose not to tackle any other aspect. Indeed, video games are able to create, a discourse about almost any topic. Rockstar games, for example, is known to produce games that are deliberately satirical and they also manage to criticize the world in which we live. It is thus no surprise that the developers implement an ideological dimension in their games. We will see more precisely in Chapter 3 how *RDR2* manages to mount an ideological discourse about our contemporary era even though the game is set at the beginning of the XIXth century.

In addition, there are different techniques that can be implemented in a discourse in order to convince an audience. Alice Krieg-Planque highlights two distinct techniques related to the implicit, namely the “présupposé” and “the sous-entendu”. On the one hand, according to Krieg-Planque, the presupposed is used to produce evidence thanks to formulations and can be defined as follows:

Le présupposé peut être défini comme une proposition qui est contenue dans l'énoncé sans être présenté comme l'objet principal du message [...] En premier lieu, le présupposé est supporté matériellement, c'est-à-dire linguistiquement dans l'énoncé. Deuxièmement, le présupposé sollicite la compétence linguistique du destinataire, c'est-à-dire sa maîtrise de la langue considérée comme un code. En troisième lieu, le présupposé ne dépend pas du contexte.⁷⁴

⁷³ Alice Krieg-Planque, *Analyser les discours institutionnels* (Malakoff, Armand Colin), 2012, p.14. “Anyone who wishes to take discourse and study it finds a multitude of fields and objects around him/her that lend themselves to such an investigation: discourse is at the heart of political and social life. On the way, very often, this survey crosses information and communication activities: these are indeed above all discursive and symbolic.” (pers. trans.)

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.122. “The presupposition can be defined as a proposal that is contained in the statement without being presented as the main subject of the message [...] Firstly, the presupposition is supported physically, i.e. linguistically in the statement. Secondly, the presupposition requires the linguistic competence of the addressee, i.e. his mastery of the language considered as a code. In the third place, the assumption does not depend on the context.” (pers. trans.)

We will see that the “presupposé” is a key element in our study because it is often used to « tenter d’imposer, de manière indirecte, certaines idées ou conceptions. »⁷⁵

On the other hand, Krieg-Planque argues that:

Le sous-entendu, tout comme le presupposé étudié précédemment, est un type d’implicite qui renvoie à une proposition : la façon dont on va pouvoir formuler l’implicite que l’on a identifié pourra être exprimé par une phrase de type Sujet + Verbe ou Sujet + Verbe + Complément [...] Le sous-entendu peut-être défini comme proposition qui peut être extraite d’un énoncé par le destinataire au moyen d’une interprétation ou d’un raisonnement.⁷⁶

We clearly see here that the “sous-entendu” is based on the audience’s interpretation and has several traits that must be discussed in order to better differentiate it from the “presuppose”⁷⁷ Krieg-Planque states the following:

En premier lieu, le sous-entendu est rendu possible par l’énoncé, mais il n’y a pas de contenu linguistique : le sous-entendu ne relève pas d’une matérialité linguistique, bien qu’il ne puisse exister sans elle. Deuxièmement, [...] le sous-entendu met en jeu avant tout la compétence encyclopédique, c’est-à-dire la compétence relative au monde et à son organisation, et la compétence pragmatique, [...] relative aux interactions et aux échanges. En troisième lieu, le sous-entendu dépend du contexte [...] Quatrièmement, le sous-entendu se produit dans l’interprétation, au sens où il est calculé, déduit, imaginé ou fantasmé par le destinataire.⁷⁸

We understand here that many values and beliefs are hidden within the content of messages.

Le sous-entendu permet de renforcer l’adhésion à une thèse, de contribuer à un travail de persuasion. Il peut conférer au locuteur le pouvoir d’insinuer [...] Le presupposé produit des effets d’évidence, soustrait les thèses à la critique, impose des points de vue.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Alice Krieg-Planque, *Analyser les discours institutionnels* (Malakoff, Armand Colin), 2012, p.140.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.144.

“The “sous-entendu”, like the “presupposé” studied above, is a type of implicit that refers to a proposal: the way in which the implicit that has been identified can be formulated: Subject + Verb or Subject + Verb + Verb + Supplement [...] The implied can be defined as a proposal that can be extracted from a statement by the addressee by means of interpretation or reasoning.” (pers. trans.)

⁷⁷ We will choose not to translate both terms for a better understanding.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.146.

“Firstly, the sous-entendu is made possible by the statement, but there is no linguistic content: the sous-entendu is not a linguistic materiality, although it cannot exist without it. Secondly, [...] the implication involves first and foremost encyclopedic competence, that is, competence relating to the world and its organization, and pragmatic competence, [...] relating to interactions and exchanges. Thirdly, the implication depends on the context [...] Fourthly, the implication occurs in the interpretation, in the sense that it is calculated, inferred, imagined or fantasized by the recipient.” (pers. trans.)

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.154.

We will put these two concepts into practice with the following sentence “*Pierre stopped smoking*”. The “presuppose” of this sentence is that Pierre used to smoke but he stopped whereas the “sous-entendu” here is multiple. It can mean that Pierre is someone courageous, or that he was angry because of that and so on ... There are many possibilities with the “sous-entendu”.

However, not all sentences have an ideological value with “presupposé” and “sous-entendu” included in them. These techniques will be particularly useful in our study since *Red Dead Redemption II* features many ideologically charged messages in conversations and in-game texts. Indeed, like many games made by Rockstar, *RDR2* features many dialogues, whether these take place during the cinematics or during the mission preparation phases.

Finally, we must discuss how words convey a specific meaning in a given context. Each word used in a discourse always corresponds to certain values. Pierre-Yves Hurel highlights a quote from Yves Reuter that perfectly illustrates this idea.

Tout d'abord, rien n'est jamais dit ou raconté de manière neutre. Tout mot, tout énoncé correspond à un double choix fondateur : choix de ce qui est dit, choix de la façon de le dire. À ce titre, tout mot, tout énoncé, tout récit est porteur de valeurs et d'intentions qui l'opposent potentiellement à d'autres mots, d'autres énoncés, d'autres récits.⁸⁰

We see here that every word used is not meaningless; it always says something about values or representations and the desire to put them forwards. A lot of discourses in *Red Dead Redemption II* carry messages that are not used innocently. Many of these messages will be analyzed in Chapter 3. There is this desire of an accurate historical representation of the very beginning of the XXth century but there is also the will of the developers to implement modern values and representations.

The “sous-entendu” makes it possible to reinforce the adherence to a thesis, to contribute to a work of persuasion. It can give the speaker the power to insinuate [...] The “presupposé” produces obvious effects, removes the theses from criticism, imposes points of view.” (pers. trans.)

⁸⁰ Yves Reuter, *L'analyse du récit*, Paris, Armand Colin, Coll. « 128 », 2009, p. 81.

“First of all, nothing is ever said or told in a neutral way. Every word, every statement corresponds to a double founding choice: the choice of what is said, and the choice of how to say it. As such, every word, every statement, every narrative carries values and intentions that can potentially be opposed to other words, other statements, other narratives.” (pers. trans.)

3. Procedural rhetoric

The processes of a game, the way it is coded, are a means of conveying ideologies. In his book *Persuasive games: the expressive power of video games*, Ian Bogost suggests that video games have unique persuasive power and that they pave the way for a new form of rhetoric, namely: procedural rhetoric. Whereas verbal and visual rhetoric respectively use oratory and images persuasively, procedural rhetoric mounts arguments through processes. In other words, it is “a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are not made through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models.”⁸¹ This new form of persuasion is crucial for our research because *Red Dead Redemption II* managed to include a contemporary worldview within the game. To do so, several arguments are expressed through the processes of the game. Ian Bogost also argues that procedural rhetoric is very strong and effective.

In order to illustrate these words, we will use two examples. The first is taken from a game called *The McDonald's videogame* (Molleindustria, 2006).⁸² What is really interesting is that this game produces a critique of the famous fast-food chain McDonalds. The game is played as follows: the player is in charge of four different aspects of the McDonalds production environment that he has to manage at the same time. The player must make choices in order to progress but he is mainly confronted to difficult moral choices. Does the player have to feed cattle by-products to reduce the costs of the fattening process, knowing that it will be more likely to cause diseases? It is quite explicit that this game highlights procedural rhetoric, not only about corruption in the fast food world but also about the “overwhelming temptation of greed.”⁸³ In short, Patrick Dugan explains that the game “makes a procedural argument about the inherent problems in the fast-food industry, particularly the necessity of overstepping environmental and health-related boundaries.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 29

⁸² This example is taken from Ian Bogost, in his book *Persuasive games: the expressive power of video games*, p. 29.

⁸³ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 31.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Now that we gained a better insight into this persuasive form of rhetoric, it is though provoking to link this concept with our study object. *Red Dead Redemption II* also develop arguments through procedural rhetoric, and it is clearly to be seen in its gameplay. We mentioned in Chapter 1 that there was an opposition between what we could do while free-roaming and what we had to do while doing main missions. The *GTA* and *Red Dead* games share a common background on this aspect because they allow the player to do whatever he wants but within the parameters of the game. These parameters are “made up of the processes it supports and excludes.”⁸⁵ They vary from a game to another since in *GTA: San Andreas* the player cannot converse with passersby while this interaction is made possible in *Red Dead Redemption II*. There are four different ways of talking to people in *RDR2*, namely: “aim weapon”, “rob”, “greet” and “antagonize”. Again, the way the player acts towards the PNJs will also have an impact on the way they act towards him. Greeting them will generate a friendly reaction that invites the player to continue the discussion and raise his honor positively. It can also occur that “greeting” someone does not generate a positive answer because the PNJ simply does not want to be bothered. Antagonizing PNJs will often lead to conflicts and fights, but if the player knocks these people out or simply captures them by using his lasso, his honor will not be impacted. However, “robbing” and “aiming weapon” will eventually lead to the player’s honor being decreased because the game considers that these are “bad” actions. Aiming weapon will not per se make the player lose honor but pulling the trigger will.

⁸⁵ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 43.



Figure 2 : It shows what actions the player can do while encountering new people. The choices you can make will then be influenced by the first action you did.

To sum up, by identifying dialogue actions as positive and violent actions as negative, the game creates a polarized system of values. However, what is interesting with *Red Dead Redemption II* is that the player has the opportunity to do the actions labelled as “bad”, which is not the case in every game. Many open world games such as *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) and *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) do not allow the player to kill friendly PNJs, which defines non-violence as a presupposition. Such system of values reflects a certain "division" of the world, because it clearly presupposes that there are fundamentally good actions (which are rewarded by a higher authority namely: the system) and other fundamentally bad ones (always subject to punishment) and that they are immediately identifiable. What is here valued as a playful mechanism is not so much pacifism, but rather the possibility of choice, the "free will" of the player (even if this free will is itself biased by the game since bad actions are punished by the system). Consequently, honor definitely plays an important role in the procedural representations of the game because it will reward the player if he does actions considered as “good” by the system but he will be punished if he does the opposite.

Moreover, it must be said that “honor” is not present in the main missions. The differences between the possibilities of action in free roaming and in main missions can be illustrated by means of several examples. The game allows the player to move freely within the game space when he is not doing missions. If he encounters a

feminist while wandering in the world, he will be able to execute the actions mentioned above with their consequences. However, encountering a feminist in the main missions will not allow him to do whatever he wants. The second chapter of the main story features a mission called *The course of true love III*, where the avatar Arthur Morgan takes part in a women's march. The player has to drive a wagon full of women waving signs pleading for women's vote. Arthur must protect these women and not only prevent men from ruining the speech but also women from being killed. In order to have a more precise idea of what is happening, the link to the mission will be put hereunder.⁸⁶ The player is given no possibilities of refusing and this is precisely where the arguments are developed.

We see that *RDR2* manages to create a polarized system of values, which greatly encourages the player to follow the good path. But the player is still free to do whatever he wants to, and if he decides to kill friendly PNJs, he is perfectly allowed to do it. We also saw that there was a difference between what the player could do in main missions and in free roam. The player will be subjected to "honor" and he will have to pay attention to his actions when he is not doing main missions.

3.1 Layering values

After having tackled procedural rhetoric and the opposition between main mission and free-roaming, we must discuss how Rockstar's latest production sometimes layers values. For example, while doing missions, the player will have to kill law enforcement officials or even members of the army. Since the main protagonists of the game are reunited in a gang of outlaws, it is thus normal that the group is wanted dead or alive by the local authorities. Throughout the game, the player will be confronted to many police officers trying to arrest him because the mission was to rob a train, a bank, etc. It is inevitable that the player will be shot at and have to shoot back. The player will kill many of these law enforcement officers during missions but his honor gauge will not be affected by these actions. However, when the player is wandering aimlessly throughout the map and suddenly decides to kill a police officer passing by, his honor gauge will suddenly go down. This is where the

⁸⁶ Red Dead Redemption 2 - Arthur Takes Part in a Women's March, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP99sJNy60k> (watched April 14). This is the link to the mission *The Course of True Love*.

layering of values occurs. Although law enforcement officials are supposed to represent the archetype of “good”, most of them are depicted as being bad, even evil in the game. Here, the procedural rhetoric conveys a conflicting message because the game will not punish the player for killing police officers if it is justified by the scenario. The values conveyed whether the player does main missions or simply just stay in free roam are different. This differentiation is not trivial and is clearly a source of discourse because killing a police officer is profoundly wrong but it can be “tolerated” if it is for the right cause. The game will definitely be stricter on the player’s actions when he is not doing missions.

Moreover, this sort of layering of values happens not only in the main missions but also in the open world. It can occur that when the player encounters PNJs, they might have a hostile behavior towards him and if the player does not leave when the PNJ asks the player to, they will eventually shoot at him even if the player did nothing wrong. Again, the game offers the player several possibilities: he can immediately leave and nothing will happen or he can kill the PNJ to defend himself. What is really interesting here is that although it was self-defense, the game will consider this as a bad action that has a negative impact on the game. The player’s honor will thus be decreased. We notice here that there is a clear difference between what the game allows you to do in main missions and in free roam. In main missions, the player will not be able to kill random PNJs for example, whereas it is made possible in free roam.

3.2 Interactivity

Interactivity represents a substantial part in our study because a game necessarily needs the player in order to advance or to make choices. “Video games are often interactive in the particular way I described above: they require user action to complete their procedural representations.”⁸⁷ In addition, the choices that are given to the player do not per se encompass all the possible choices. Bogost states: “Interesting choices do not necessarily entail all possible choices in a given situation;

⁸⁷ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p.45.

rather, choices are selectively included and excluded in a procedural representation to produce the desired expressive end.”⁸⁸

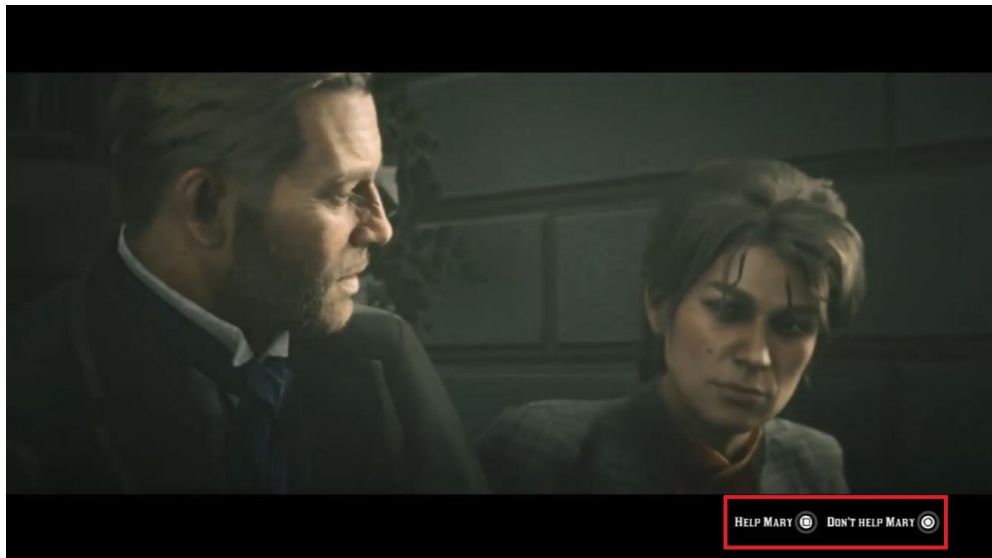


Figure 3 : This figure shows that the player is often confronted to two different options and that the game will not continue until he makes a decision.

The picture above perfectly illustrates these words because there are only two options given to the player and the path the avatar will follow will forcefully be dictated by the player. Another example regards the right to death or life on a NPC. The action that will be conducted will be the result of the button the player pressed and it will have consequences on the environment of the game. However, sometimes the player will not have the choice to do a particular action, and he will have be a spectator of what is happening without being able to do anything.

Moreover, since games require interactivity in order to make their players progress, we must first establish different degrees of interactivity and representations of the players. Fanny Barnabé, in her thesis *Rhétorique du détournement vidéoludique : Le cas de Pokémon*, compares the tutorials of two games, namely: *Candy Crush* (King, 2012) and *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015). These games both have different approaches regarding the representation of the player and their degree of interactivity. On the one hand, *Candy crush* features a very long tutorial that extends over several levels. Levels during which the player is very restricted in his actions because the game tells

⁸⁸ Ibidem.

the player what he/she has to do without allowing him/her to do anything else.⁸⁹ On the other hand, *Undertale* « n'offre au joueur que très peu d'indications sur la manière de gagner son premier combat et le laisse libre d'expérimenter les différentes actions qui lui sont proposées. »⁹⁰ The game is based on experimentation, exploration and repetition⁹¹, which are very different from the way Candy Crush works.

Consequently, games give representations of the player. They can show him/her that he can do many actions that he/she is very restricted in what can be done. Games do not have per se the same degree of interactivity.

4. Ideology

Many video games can be considered as having persuasive power since they are able to convey ideological messages. *Red Dead Redemption II* is definitely part of these ideologically charged games because it tackles many subjects linked to politics and visions of the world. To begin with, it would be interesting to define what ideology precisely consists of. Since this concept plays key role in our research, we have to find an appropriate description and meaning of the term. Many people attempted to give their own definition, such as Karl Marx, for whom ideology “entails the delusion that ideas are material; in particular, the petite bourgeoisie sees itself (has an idea of itself) as universal.” In his book *The German Ideology*, Marx depicts ideology as an “empty dream, an imaginary DIY.”⁹² However, the most interesting definition for us is the one proposed by Louis Althusser, who defines it as follows: « L'idéologie est alors le système des idées, des représentations qui domine l'esprit d'un homme ou d'un groupe social. »⁹³ Ideologies can be conveyed through many aspects within a game, namely: the different elements inherent in narratological and ludological elements. This chapter will deal with each one of these elements

⁸⁹ Fanny Barnabé, *Rhétorique du détournement vidéoludique : Le cas de Pokémon*, University of Liege, Belgium, 2017, pp. 36-37.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

⁹¹ Fanny Barnabé, *Rhétorique du détournement vidéoludique : Le cas de Pokémon*, University of Liege, Belgium, 2017, p. 38.

⁹² Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p.73.

⁹³ Louis Althusser, *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État* (Paris, Les Éditions sociales), p.34. “Ideology is then the system of ideas, representations that dominates the mind of a man or a social group.” (pers. trans.)

separately and we will see how these manage to elaborate a discourse through different means of representation such as gameplay, images, representations and the contents represented such as beliefs, values, etc.

The game *America's Army* illustrates perfectly how a game can be a vector of ideology. *America's Army* is a first person shooter-game funded by the American government. This game can be compared to *Counter Strike* (one of the most famous shooting games in the world) since both games share many similarities. They are both first person shooter and both games feature two different teams fighting against each other for victory. This game was used as an army recruiting tool for young people willing to engage in the army and is definitely more used for the exposition of a contemporary U.S ideology of war than for the representation of the brutality of war. Indeed, the game's persuasive goals are twofold:

On the one hand, as a U.S. Army recruiting tool the game creates a representation of army life that draws interested youth into recruiting offices. On the other hand, as a manifestation of the ideology that propels the U.S Army, the game encourages player to consider the logic of duty, honor, and singular global political truth as a desirable worldview.⁹⁴

We will see that *RDR2*, and many games in general, include a system of representations on different aspects, but we still have to discuss one very important aspect linked to ideology, namely: discourse. Therefore, we will link ideology to discourse in the upcoming subchapter.

5. Morality

The notion of morality and is a substantial aspect of many video games. *RDR2* often lets the player choose what actions he wants to take and, therefore, he has to accept the consequences linked to the action performed. Cameron James Moore, in his article *Making Moral Choices in Video Games*, states the following:

Some games create elaborately imagined other worlds in which characters pursue intricate plot-paths that require important moral choices. I have in mind titles such as the *Fable* series and the *Mass Effect* series—role-playing games in which

⁹⁴ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007) p.78.

narrative progression by characters through a created world is a crucial element of the play.⁹⁵

RDR2 shares a common ground with games such as *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004) and *Mass Effect* (Electronic Arts, 2007). These are two games in which the path chosen by the player will greatly affect the narrative and, therefore, a player will not have the same narrative experience than another one since they have the choice to become either good or bad. Moore adds that:

Video games, then, have a great potential to provide immersive experiences in fantasy stories of good and evil. As we become agents within their complex narrative arcs, we can develop skills of moral perception and decisionmaking.⁹⁶

Ian Bogost also discusses the question of morality in his book *Persuasive games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* and wonders if procedural rhetoric can influence the world we live in beyond the screen. He uses Ren Jenkins' words, which are the following: "just think about the choices you have to take to win, and consider what they say about you,"⁹⁷ and clearly contradicts them. Indeed, Bogost argues that:

Simply playing a videogame need not entail the player's adoption of the represented value system; the player might oppose, question or otherwise internalize its claim: which processes does it include, and which does it exclude? What rules does the game enforce, and how do those rules correlate, correspond, or conflict with an existing morality outside the game?⁹⁸

Bogost answers those questions by linking morality and ideology: "Videogames often enforce moral values through ideology. Many commercial games also have attempted to engage in ethical deliberation."⁹⁹ We already used the example of the game *XIII* in Chapter 1 to demonstrate how a game can embed ethical values within the main character. According to Miguel Sicart:¹⁰⁰

The moral imperative is inscribed in the character, the game consequence affording the player an insight into the role he enacts in the game, rather into the player's own, extra-ludic moral code. The procedural rhetoric is not necessarily

⁹⁵ J. Cameron Moore, *Making Moral Choices in Video Games*, Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2011, p.69.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.74.

⁹⁷ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 284.

⁹⁸ Ibidem.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Scholar with a background in philosophy of technology, literature, and game studies.

normative; it does not make a case for the transference of behavior from avatar to player.¹⁰¹

The avatar in *Red Dead Redemption* shares this moral imperative as it is clearly embedded the character. The game also generates another procedural space for moral choices thanks to the honor gauge, which is a key aspect in certain games regarding values such as morality. We saw it, killing a police officer in free roam will definitely lead to bad honor for example.

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic is a game that is very similar to *Red Dead Redemption* because they both feature a system of morality based on the player's decision. "Each decision the player makes (whom to help, fight, ignore) affects the player's moral attribute [...] Over time, the player's moral character is set by these individual actions."¹⁰² Usually, there are different endings based on the decisions the player has made throughout the game. If the player chooses to play as a criminal, he will end up with a bad ending and vice versa. Bogost also argues that:

These games attempt to create procedural models of morality, but they do so solely through an arithmetic logic. Gestures are inherently good or bad [...] and morality always resides at a fixed point along the linear progression between the two.¹⁰³

Consequently, there are many ways in which games managed to implement a moral-based system in their play. However, what will be particularly interesting for us is how these values can be seen not only through the avatar but also through the system of honor.

6. Repressive State Apparatuses & Ideological State Apparatuses

The environment in which the player evolves also embodies values and thus opens the door to ideologically influenced elements. Rémi Cayatte first argues that the spaces in which the player evolves are ideologically filled.

¹⁰¹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 284.

¹⁰² Ibidem.

¹⁰³ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 285.

Les espaces virtuels dans lesquels le joueur est amené à évoluer peuvent être vus comme des endroits dans lesquels une idéologie, un rapport imaginaire des individus à leurs conditions réelles d'existence, se réalise et se manifeste.¹⁰⁴

These virtual spaces are submitted to different institutions. For example, the virtual space of the camp where the avatar and his group are living is submitted to an Ideological State Apparatus that is linked to Family (see below). Louis Althusser distinguishes between two types of institutions. On the one hand, there are institutions called the “Repressive State Apparatuses,” which are institutions operating on violence. We are here talking about the police, courts and the army. On the other hand, we have the “Ideological State Apparatuses,” and these are institutions that operate on ideology such as “the church, the family and the educational system.”¹⁰⁵ According to Althusser, “subjectivity is shaped, even generated, by social institutions and processes, acting through systems of signification that supply individuals with their identifications.”¹⁰⁶

The idea is to say that schools as well as other State Apparatuses teach know-how but in forms that:

Assurent l'assujettissement à l'idéologie dominante, ou la maîtrise de sa « pratique » Tous les agents de la production, de l'exploitation et de la répression, sans parler des « professionnels de l'idéologie » (Marx) doivent être à un titre ou à un autre « pénétrés » de cette idéologie, pour s'acquitter « consciencieusement » de leur tâche - soit d'exploités (les prolétaires), soit d'exploiteurs (les capitalistes), soit d'auxiliaires de l'exploitation (les cadres), soit de grands prêtres de l'idéologie dominante (ses « fonctionnaires »), etc.¹⁰⁷

Moreover, Rémi Cayatte, in his thesis *Les jeux vidéo américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, un nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique ?* adds that :

Les jeux vidéo, en plus d'être à même de produire un « travail idéologique », sont également à rapprocher des Appareils Idéologiques d'État en tant que lieux.

¹⁰⁴ Rémi Cayatte, *Les jeux vidéos américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique?*, University of Lorraine, France, 2016, p.120.

“The virtual spaces in which the player is led to evolve can be seen as places in which an ideology, an imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence, is realized and manifested.” (pers. trans.)

¹⁰⁵ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p.74.

¹⁰⁶ Bob Rehak, “Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar”, in *The video game theory reader*, 2003, p. 121.

¹⁰⁷ Louis Althusser, *Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État* (Paris, Les Éditions sociales), p.12.

Les espaces virtuels dans lesquels le joueur est amené à évoluer peuvent être vus comme des endroits dans lesquels une idéologie, un rapport imaginaire des individus à leurs conditions réelles d'existence, se réalise et se manifeste.¹⁰⁸

These State Apparatuses can be found in the world of many video games and we will discuss how they play a role in the ideology of the game. We will link these ideological institutions with *Red Dead Redemption II* in Chapter 3. First, we will start with the Repressive institutions and then we will move on to the Ideological institutions.

7. Repressive State Apparatuses

7.1 The police

In many games, police institutions are often represented either by law enforcement officers, police chiefs, detectives, etc. The missions defended by these institutions are obviously the respect of the law and the protection of the civilians. Their role is to take action when someone violates the law. In their article « Les idéologies professionnelles : une analyse en classes latentes des opinions policières sur le rôle de la police » Philippe Coulangeon, Geneviève Pruvost et Ionela Roharik distinguish between three types of classes, namely: median, repressive and preventive. The medians « se caractérisent [...] par leur place intermédiaire entre les deux extrêmes que sont les partisans d'une police répressive et les partisans d'une police préventive » The repressive think that « les missions de police sont de faire respecter la loi [...] et en deuxième position [...] d'arrêter les délinquants. » Finally, the preventive « accordent en effet, contrairement aux autres, une grande importance à la protection des institutions républicaines. »¹⁰⁹ We see here that the police is divided in three large groups that consider having different global missions.

¹⁰⁸ Rémi Cayatte, *Les jeux vidéos américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique?*, University of Lorraine, France, 2016, p.119.

“Video games, in addition to being able to produce an ideological work, are also to be compared to the State Ideological Apparatus as places. The virtual spaces in which the player is led to evolve can be seen as places in which an ideology, an imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence, is realized and manifested.” (pers. trans.)

¹⁰⁹ Philippe Coulangeon, Geneviève Pruvost et Ionela Roharik, « Les idéologies professionnelles : une analyse en classes latentes des opinions policières sur le rôle de la police », in *Revue française de sociologie*, 2012/3 Vol.53, pp.505-508.

“The medians “are characterized [...] by their intermediary place between the two extremes of repressive police and preventive police. The repressive think that police missions are to enforce the

However, what is really interesting with the games made by Rockstar is that they allow the player to embody heroes opposed to traditional values. It is still the case with *RDR2* since the player embodies a dangerous outlaw. Indeed, Olivier Mauco argues that:

Dans l'immense majorité des jeux d'action, le joueur est invité à contrôler un soldat, soit une figure classique de la puissance publique. Les jeux vidéo sont très conformistes, et s'ils proposent des contenus pouvant être quelque fois visuellement violents, l'usage de la force est toujours en conformité avec le principe [...] de monopole de violence physique par la puissance publique. Le caractère sulfureux des productions Rockstar est donc à rechercher du côté des héros « déviant » par rapport aux normes socialement acceptées. De fait, ils peuvent être considérés comme des marginaux, [...] non intégrés et reconnus comme partie intégrantes du système politique. Les marginaux sont des figures doublement déviantes, par rapport à l'espace social du joueur et au sein de l'univers de jeu.¹¹⁰

The player is thus often led to fight against the law authorities since the characters of the GTA license opuses are criminals and, therefore, their most obvious antagonists are the police officers. *GTA San Andreas*, for example, features an avatar named Carl Johnson who falls into delinquency after his mother's murder. The law is thus something the avatar has to go against, and, therefore, when the player encounters police agents, he can kill them and, sometimes, he will have to kill them. In France, "the General Police Union had convicted *GTA I & II* because both games allowed killing police officers." The player finds himself at the opposite of what society finds politically acceptable because the game features a system of standards that compete with those that exist in reality.¹¹¹

law [...] and indeed in second place to arrest offenders". Finally, the preventive, unlike the others, give great importance to the protection of republican institutions." (pers. trans.)

¹¹⁰ Olivier Mauco, *GTA IV : l'envers du rêve américain, jeux vidéo et critique sociale* (Quercy, Editions Questions Théoriques), 2013, p.61.

"In the vast majority of action games, the player is invited to control a soldier, a classic figure of public power. Video games are very conformist, and if they offer content that can sometimes be visually violent, the use of force is always in accordance with the principle [...] of monopoly of physical violence by the public authorities. The sulphurous nature of Rockstar productions is therefore to be found on the side of deviant heroes in relation to socially accepted norms. In fact, they can be considered as marginal, [...] non-integrated and recognized as an integral part of the political system. The marginalized are figures that are doubly deviant, in relation to the player's social space and within the gaming universe." (pers. trans.)

¹¹¹ Olivier Mauco, *GTA IV : l'envers du rêve américain, jeux vidéo et critique sociale* (Quercy, Editions Questions Théoriques), 2013, pp.63-66.

7.2 The army

The army is an institution that is very often represented in games in general. Many triple A games¹¹² feature such an institution, like the *Call of Duty* series for example. We already saw how a video game could be an ideological vector of values related to the military thanks to the game *America's Army* (see supra). The *Call of Duty* series often features the United-States Army operating in various regions around the world. These games, and more particularly the *Modern Warfare* series (*Call of Duty Modern Warfare*, *Modern Warfare II* and *Modern Warfare III*) « promeuvent l'usage de la force comme seule réponse crédible aux dangers menaçant l'Occident en général et les États-Unis en particulier. »¹¹³ Like the game *America's Army*, the *Modern Warfare* series illustrates a positive view of military engagement and clearly convey « une certaine idée de la guerre en général, et de conflits contemporains en particulier. »¹¹⁴ The army is an institution that is definitely able to produce a repressive ideological discourse. A discourse that sometimes encourages young people to enrol in the army by showing them a very positive vision of war and that war is necessary to protect one's homeland.

Regarding *Red Dead Redemption II* the United States Army is encountered pretty far in the game. It serves as a minor, antagonistic faction throughout most of the game and is almost exclusively encountered in a very small and specific area. The only reason the player has to deal with the Army is to help the Indians that are relentlessly persecuted. It is really interesting because the Indians are presented as peaceful, willing to conclude peace treaties whereas the US Army is depicted as hateful, breaking every treaty. This Indian peacefulness is strengthened by the music. A mission in Chapter 6 called *Honor, Amongst Thieves* asks the player to collect medicine for the Indians that were stolen by the American Colonel named Favours in

¹¹² A Triple A game is a term used for video games with the highest development and promotion budgets. Such games can have also received a huge amount of good ratings.

¹¹³ Rémi Cayatte, *Les jeux vidéos américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique?*, University of Lorraine, France, 2016, p. 184.
“Promote the use of force as the only credible response to the dangers threatening the West in general and the United States in particular.” (pers. trans.)

¹¹⁴ Rémi Cayatte, *Les jeux vidéos américains de l'après 11 septembre 2001 : la guerre faite jeu, nouveau terrain de propagande idéologique?*, University of Lorraine, France, 2016, p. 285.
“A certain idea of war in general, and contemporary conflicts in particular.” (pers. trans.)

order to “punish” them. The beginning of the mission features a very calm music, with animal noises that emphasizes the peacefulness and pacifism of the Indians.

It is very interesting but normal (in the context of *RDR2*) to see that the “law officers” are the antagonists when they are supposed to be the opposite. The character we get to play was raised in criminality, as we will see further in this chapter, it is thus no surprise that our main enemy is the incarnation of the modernized society. The gang of Dutch always considered themselves as free men, which means that they could do whatever they want and still not be punished. However, the end of the XVIIIth century and the beginning of the XIXth century mark the arrival of industrialized towns and the development of rail roads. Cities become more secure and it becomes very difficult for outlaws to do their business peacefully without being chased. Every time the group tries to score a big hit, they are relentlessly chased by the authorities.

We will not tackle the third aspect called “the courts” since the high authorities are not represented in the game. We can therefore make no assumptions regarding their ideology.

8. Ideological State Apparatuses

It must be mentioned that we will only examine the Church and the Family since the Educational system is not present in the game.

8.1 The Church

The religious aspect of *Red Dead Redemption II* is essential in our study since it is, in some way, linked with the system of honor. Religions are often mocked in Rockstar’s games. A very simple and illustrative example is Reverend Swanson, a member Dutch’s gang. Rockstar itself depicts Swanson as “a former clergyman now lost to debauchery,” Swanson has fallen a long way from the standards he once set himself and struggles with many demons. If he hadn’t saved Dutch’s life in the past, it’s unlikely the gang would have kept him around for this long.”¹¹⁵ Swanson is the opposite of the respectful clergyman.

¹¹⁵ Information taken from the Red dead Redemption Database: <https://www.gtabase.com/red-dead-redemption-2/characters/reverend-swanson> (accessed April 28, 2019).

The game also features a fictitious religion called “Chelonia.” According to Rockstar, the Chelonians believe in a utopian society which they call Chelonia, and believe that the only way to be truly safe from the evils of current-day America is to dedicate everything to the cult. They mostly recruit young men, which made them very unpopular in the game. The player can only deal with them while doing main missions. The player will have the choice to strangle the leader or to talk to him peacefully.

However, religion has always been a part of many video games and is often a subject of controversy in the media. We will tackle a few of these games to show how much religion is present in this medium. The horror game *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013) immerses the player in a world where Christianity is pushed to the extreme. For example, the player is shown priests molesting children, sacrificial ceremonies, etc. *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft, 2018) has also been much talked about because the game is set in America, and the player has to face a dangerous and violent religious cult.

Un contexte qui a fait polémique dans les États-Unis de Donald Trump, notamment chez les suprémacistes blancs américains qui l'ont accusé de "propagande anti-blancs", s'inquiétant d'y découvrir des antagonistes caucasiens et visiblement catholiques.¹¹⁶

The game makes a substantial number of links with religion. The antagonist, Joseph Seed, calls himself “The Father,” and is the leader of an extremist religious cult called “The project at Eden’s Gate.” We must specify that although the antagonists have:

Extremely white supremacist vibes in their conceptualization and their iconography [...] both sides have white, black and Asian fighters, you, the lead character, can be any race you want and it has zero effect on the story whatsoever.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Olivier Bénis, « Cultes et jeu vidéo : Far Cry 5 est un reflet de ce qui s'est passé (et qui se passe encore) aux États-Unis », in *France Inter*, March 27, 2018, [online], <https://www.franceinter.fr/monde/far-cry-5-est-un-reflet-de-ce-qui-s-est-passe-et-qui-se-passe-encore-aux-etats-unis> (accessed June 26, 2019).

“A context that has been controversial in Donald Trump's United States, particularly among American white supremacists who have accused him of "anti-white propaganda", worrying about discovering Caucasian and visibly Catholic antagonists there.” (pers. trans.)

¹¹⁷ Paul Tassi, “Far Cry 5 is apolitical to the point of absurdity”, in *Forbes*, March 27, 2019, [online], <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2018/03/27/far-cry-5-is-apolitical-to-the-point-of-absurdity/#26aaf70e5c2e> (accessed June 26, 2019).

The religious aspect is thus present but very limited since the developers did not want to raise too many controversies and played a lot on political correctness.



Figure 4 : This image can be found on the game cover and remind us of the painting called “The Last Supper” where Jesus eats with his apostles.

We see here that religion is definitely part of these ideological institutions and those games are able to criticize a lot of aspects inherent in society. Ubisoft used *Far Cry 5* to ridicule members of such extreme institutions. It is also interesting to point out that in video games, religion tends to be more often critically represented in its abuses. For example, violence, mass manipulation and discrimination are often associated with religion. Such negative representation contrasts with the army, which is often represented positively.

According to this context, the criticism of religion and the criticism of the army in *RDR2* do not have the same status. They are not subversive in the same way because one is more common than another.

8.2 The Family

Family definitely plays an important role regarding one’s ideology. It is thus no surprise that some games choose to put this aspect forward. The Awards-winning game *The Last of Us* depicts a father-daughter relationship. Indeed, the game is set in a post-apocalyptic world where the majority of people died due to an uncontrolled infection. This is a world in which the main character, Joel, lost his biological daughter short after the infection began. However, he will eventually meet a little girl called Ellie, to whom he will get attached because she reminds him of his lost

daughter. The purpose of the game is to escort Ellie all over the United States but when Joel discovers that Ellie is immune to the virus and that she has to be killed in order to save humanity, he decides to protect her and not to save the world. Throughout the campaign, the game builds up a strong representation of family value as being superior to all others.

The notion of family also comes up within *Red Dead Redemption II* but it is more metaphorical. The gang of Dutch is considered as being one large family; loyalty is also a very important aspect for each member. Two very strong ideologies are opposed in the group as the story unfolds. On the one hand, Dutch's ideology heavily opposes modernization and he believes in a return to nature. This aspect is clearly to be seen throughout the game because he seeks a place far from modern civilization. He always wants to do one last score before leaving. Dutch is very interesting because only cares about himself and will not help any of his crew members unless he benefits from it. As the story goes on, Dutch becomes more and more violent, and makes irrational decisions that put his family members in danger. Even his right-hand, Hosea said to him: "You'll damn us all, Dutch!"¹¹⁸ For example, after the robbery attempt in Saint-Denis, John Marston, one of the oldest members of the group, is captured by the police and sent to prison. Many members of the group, including Arthur, wanted to save John but Dutch did not want the risk to be taken. However, Arthur will eventually rescue John but behind Dutch's back. Ian Bogost argues that "morally depraved adults do not deserve to prosper and may even be dangerous."¹¹⁹ He then makes a comparison with *GTA: San Andreas* and says that "*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* also implies support for the metaphor of crime as decadence". We saw it; Dutch becomes more and more violent and does inconsiderate actions that can be related to decadence.

The avatar is at the opposite of the values conveyed by Dutch. Arthur was raised by Dutch and Hosea (Dutch's right arm), he was thus conditioned to do things for Dutch and has no true sense of right and wrong. He was raised to be an outlaw, and was mainly influenced by Dutch's ideology. We can see that during the first chapters,

¹¹⁸ This conversation takes place right before the robbery attempt in Saint-Denis.

¹¹⁹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 117.

Arthur does not question Dutch's decisions and many of his violent actions are only the consequences from the fact that he was raised seeing many wrong actions as a typical way of life. During the last chapters, as he becomes older and is close to death, he starts to question several decisions he made in his life and he begins to act following his own convictions and beliefs. For example, Herr Strauss, the accountant of the group was known to lend money to people he knew would not be able to pay their debt. Arthur was always sent to threaten them and to take the money back doing whatever it took. In chapter 6, Arthur is asked again to go and collect money but this time, he says "no" and hurries Strauss to pack his things and to leave the camp.

The disciplined man is strong, and therefore moral, whereas the man who cannot stand up to temptation is weak, and therefore immoral.¹²⁰

This citation perfectly illustrates the opposition between the characters Dutch and Arthur.

9. Stereotypes

Alexis Blanchet, in his book *Des Pixels à Hollywood: cinéma et jeu vidéo. Une histoire économique et culturelle*, argues that video games easily borrow elements from narrative media like cinema and it happens that one of these elements actually regards stereotypes.¹²¹ Stereotypes definitely have their importance in such games because they are a means of expressing ideology, although Rockstar decided to tone down the stereotypical aspect of several characters because of the current context of production. Dan Houser himself said:

Both intense liberal progression and intense conservatism are both very militant, and very angry. It is scary but it's also strange, and yet both of them seem occasionally to veer towards the absurd. It's hard to satirize for those reasons. Some of the stuff you see is straightforwardly beyond satire. It would be out of date within two minutes, everything is changing so fast.¹²²

That is precisely why *Red Dead Redemption II* has a more serious approach than the previous games of Rockstar. Dan Houser also explains that the game approach to

¹²⁰ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Game: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 114.

¹²¹ Alexis Blanchet, *Des pixels à Hollywood, cinéma et jeux vidéo. Une histoire économique et culturelle* (Châtillon, Pix'n love editions), 2010, p. 99.

¹²² IGN, "Dan Houser Thankful Not to Be Releasing Grand Theft Auto 6 Right Now", October 24, 2018, [online], <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/10/24/dan-houser-thankful-not-to-be-releasing-grand-theft-auto-6-right-now> (accessed April 18, 2019).

presenting history is built around modern values, but we will discuss this aspect in the following chapter. However, we must mention that several characters are still stereotyped regarding their personality traits.

The player must be able to define who is who, and that is why stereotypes are often used to define characters. In order to have a better understanding of how stereotypes work, we must first define what stereotypes are. Ruth Amossy defines the concept of stereotype as such: « le stéréotype a d'abord été identifié aux préjugés, au "mal jugé", (Walter Lippman, 1922) avant d'être en partie réhabilité comme facteur de cohésion sociale (Leyens, 1996) et surtout comme processus cognitif de généralisation inhérent à l'exercice de la pensée. »¹²³ According to Ellie Zenners, professor at the KU Leuven, stereotypes often form the basis of attitudes, whether these are negative or positive and they have different purposes and they can be considered as mental shortcuts.¹²⁴ In addition, Alexis Blanchet also argues that:

Le jeu vidéo [...] fait appel à des péripéties stéréotypées dans la mesure où la stéréotypie permet l'identification plus rapide de l'événement et de sa fonction dans l'économie d'ensemble du récit.¹²⁵

For example, we already saw that Dutch's gang had an accountant who was German. The player can easily figure this out simply by the name of the character "Strauss" and the way he speaks given that he has a very strong German accent.

Moreover, stereotypes reinforce similarities within a group and differences between groups. These stereotypes are mostly "remediatized" thanks to the PNJs. Indeed, the player can encounter PNJs that perfectly represent the nature of their homeland. Take for example a side mission called *He is British, Of Course*, during which the player has to help a poor British man retrieve his animals for his circus. He will ask him to find his zebra that is actually a donkey painted in black and white. And the same goes for the other animals the player will have to find. There is clearly a link between the name of the mission and the eccentricity shown by the British man. British are

¹²³ Branca, « Stéréotypes et clichés. Langue - discours - société, Ruth Amossy et Anne Herschberg Pierrot », *Langage et société*, n°87, 1999, pp. 143.

¹²⁴ Ellie Zenners, Sociolinguistiek, KU Leuven, 2016-2017

¹²⁵ Alexis Blanchet, *Des pixels à Hollywood, cinéma et jeux vidéo. Une histoire économique et culturelle* (Châtillon, Pix'n love editions), 2010, p. 99.
"Video games [...] use stereotypical adventures insofar as stereotypy allows the event and its function to be identified more quickly in the overall economy of the story." (pers. trans.)

thought to be eccentric, and that image is accurately conveyed through this side mission. There are many more examples to be discussed regarding stereotypical aspects and in what way they create a discourse but we will come back at it in Chapter 3. Stereotypes lie not only in the NPCs of the game but also in the different situations the player has to go through.



Figure 5: British people are thought the dress eccentrically; this Englishman is the perfect example of it. Not only is he British in the way he dresses but also in the way he acts. A prevents to have a circle with exotic animals but they are only “normal” animals disguised.

10. Conclusion

It is now clear that video games are an expressive medium that is able to convey ideologically charged messages. A discourse can be easily developed thanks to many elements that are part of a game. This chapter was thus dedicated to the analysis of “discourse” and “ideology”, two key notions that will be of paramount importance for the following chapter. We also examined stereotypes and how important they were in the game. Now that we established a solid theoretical basis, we can move on to Chapter 3 that will be dedicated to the analysis of specific moments of the game, whether these happen in main missions or in free roam.

Part 3: the means put in place to deliver a discourse in *Red Dead Redemption 2*

1. Introduction

In Chapter 1, we examined not only the different components of the video game medium in general but also the specific characteristics of *Red Dead Redemption II*. A comparison was also established between cinema and video games. The previous chapter was dedicated to the analysis of key elements such as discourse and ideology, and how these were linked to several components of games. This chapter will focus on the elements that allow *Red Dead Redemption II* to carry a discourse about another era and precisely what type of discourse is conveyed. To do so, we will take into account each relevant element of the game that actually says something about the world we live in. To that end, we will take very meaningful situations that the player has to face during his journey playing the game, and see how these situations reflect a discourse about our era. We will choose to proceed in this way because several aspects of video games come together. A particular scene for example will involve the avatar, the cut scenes, the gameplay, the interactivity and so on. We will base our analysis on a wide range of situations triggered whenever the player passes by and on the main missions the player will have to do.

2. Particular scenes reflecting discourses about another era

2.1 The beginning of feminism and the suffragette of Saint-Denis

Red Dead Redemption II includes many PNJs and situations informed by feminism. Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapter, the player must escort a feminist march, or he can interact with a feminist in Saint-Denis, the industrialized town of the game. The scene of the Saint-Denis' suffragette is particularly relevant for our study because it involves the use of a lot of aspects inherent in video games. To begin with, procedural rhetoric directly plays a role as soon as you interact with the suffragette. Whether you choose to "greet" or "antagonize" her the first time the player meets her, her reaction will not be different and she will utter the same discourse. This aspect contrasts with the other PNJs because they will have a different reaction following what the player decides to do. The interactivity is also

important here because the player has to go nearby the suffragette, press circle or square, and the interaction takes place as such:

- Suffragette: what do you think about women's suffrage?
- Arthur: Women voting? Sure, why not.
- Suffragette: Thank you, sir, you are a true progressive.
- Arthur: Anyone dumb to wanna vote, I say go for it.
- Suffragette: Oh, a cynic, how dull for you. I hope you grow out of it young man. It's so unappealing.
- Arthur: Unappealing is what I do best.

To begin with, and for a better understanding of this scene, we must contextualize what suffragettes are and when they made their appearance. Historically, the suffragettes appeared in the XIXth century and they fought hard for the women's right to vote, which they will obtain in 1920. In order to be noticed, the suffragettes used to take action and to demonstrate publicly in order to be noticed and heard. The game is set up between the end of the XIXth century and beginning of the XXth century. Women have thus not the right to vote yet. It is thus not surprising that the player encounters a suffragette demonstrating in the streets.

As soon as the player presses a button to trigger the interaction, the screen narrows and player enters a cut scene, from which he cannot escape. Therefore, the player has no power on what is being said or done, which allows the game to convey certain values through discourse. If the player does not choose to interact, then the conversation will never start. The avatar is depicted here as someone who is not against women voting, the suffragette even says he is someone "progressive". When the suffragette asks Arthur what he thinks about women's suffrage, he answers "Sure, why not". His answer is surprising because in the end of the XIXth century, the right to vote for women was something really new and it was uncommon that men agreed to it. In order to understand this attitude, we just have to take look at one the main missions that we tackled in the previous chapter, called *The Course of True Love* where the player has to protect a feminist march from other men. We also examined in the previous chapter that the avatar was an "avatar-marionette" and, therefore, was predefined before the beginning of the game. The avatar really stands

out from the world he lives in and does not mind women voting. Even though the player can choose to turn Arthur into a dangerous killer or a low-key criminal, the character himself, deprived of the choices and interactions of the player, is someone very open-minded. It is thus not surprising that he does not per se antagonize the right for women to vote.

This conversation with the suffragette also illustrates that the avatar lets people do what they want to do. We will see in other examples that he encourages people to do what makes them happy and will always be willing to help. Afterwards, Arthur says that people who are willing to vote are dumb. This statement is not surprising because we learn throughout the game that he is not really into politics since he comes from a family of peasants. On the one hand, this sentence can be understood as a humorous reply because the avatar usually gives ironic and cynic answers but, on the other hand, we can understand that Arthur does not believe in politics since he is an outlaw and, therefore, does not believe in the political system. He is opposed to the dominant system that is continuously spreading West. This expansion refers to the Manifest Destiny doctrine, which:

Held that the United States was destined—by God, its advocates believed—to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent.¹²⁶

This Manifest Destiny doctrine will also be seen on the conflict between the Redskins and the Americans authorities, which we will be tackled later on in this chapter. The suffragette then highlights Arthur's cynic personality trait before ending the conversation.

Later on, the player can come back and talk to the suffragette one more time. AS expected, the conversation will be very different:

- Suffragette: you know... it's terribly important.
- Arthur: What is? Voting

¹²⁶ History.com, *Manifest Destiny*, <https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/manifest-destiny> (accessed August 13, 2019).

- Suffragette: Yes, terribly. Once women get the vote, the whole country will stop making such a pig's ear of everything. They'll be no more wars, no hunger, no stupidity. We'll elect a women president within the first ten years, of course. You see... men are such judgmental prigs... you need us women to help straighten you out. Okay, with us helping... I'm not saying there won't be trouble... I just think... we'll do a better job of things.
- Arthur: Well, I hope you're right. Good luck.

The suffragette symbolizes the early feminist movement and clearly advocates for women rights. She develops a discourse in which she states that the country will be better off if women have the power to decide. The global message of the suffragette is historically accurate but some of her words represent a caricatured vision of what would happen if women were able to vote. They did demonstrate, claimed the right for women to vote but some of her sentences, like “we'll elect a women president within the first ten years, of course” are idealized. Since Rockstar's games are known to be satirical, her words might have been purposely exaggerated and this is also clearly to be seen when she says that there “*they'll be no more wars, no hunger, no stupidity. We'll elect a women president within the first ten years, of course.*” As we mentioned above, the game does not overdo the overall message of the suffragette. Women used such great words in order to be heard and to make the feminist cause move forward. As we saw earlier, this is a very avant-gardist discourse for the context of the game but, again, Arthur does not try to contest or reprimand her. He just hopes she is indeed right and leave her be, even though he does not seem convinced by what she says.

Lastly, what is also interesting is that this PNJ was mistreated by many players. But when the player chooses to harm or kill her, the player's honor gauge is decreased. This is also precisely where the rules of the game intervene. We will see that Rockstar plays a lot on the honor gauge in order to develop a discourse regarding our era.



Figure 6: We see here that killing the feminist directly affects the player's honor gauge

In conclusion, this particular scene shows us that *RDR2* manages to reflect a discourse regarding feminism through many elements inherent in the game. We saw here that the avatar himself is depicted as someone progressive and open-minded and therefore is not against women being elected. He is opposed to the system in place and he does not seem to believe the suffragette regarding what she plans on accomplishing, but he still hopes she will. However, he will not try to discourage her or say anything disrespectful, unlike many other men shown in the game. The cut scenes also allow a discourse to be reflected because the player is powerless and has to witness what is being said (or not if he/she is not interested in the narrative of the game). The avatar will never prevent someone from doing what he or she does unless this person threatens his group or himself. The link to the two interactions will be put here under.¹²⁷

2.2 The eugenic supporter of Saint-Denis

Race and ethnicity also have an important place in *RDR2*. While wandering in the streets of Saint-Denis, the player will inevitably come across a man on the side of the

¹²⁷ Red Dead Redemption 2: Interactions with the suffragette, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQbtkLYdw4> (watched April 14).

road. The player will not be able to interact with him before he finishes his discourse. The procedural rhetoric plays a role here because the player has to wait for the eugenics supporter to finish his discourse to engage the conversation, which starts as such:

- Norris Forsythe: Read one of my pamphlets, I explain the exact difference between races using real science. I want you to ask yourself: do I consider myself pure. And then I want you to ask yourself, what is the most disgusting, revolting, vulgar and depressing thing in all Creation? Mingling, co-mingling. Nature... nature likes purity. Nature does not like co-mingling. Nature likes a family tree... not a family bush. And this being America and us being nature's paradise on Earth... we must push for purity. I want you... I need you...to be pure.

We must first say that the player has no obligation to listen to what is being said, and he can just wait for the interaction to be made possible. However, for the sake of this study, we will choose to pay attention to Norris Forsythe's words. After he finishes his discourse, the player can interact with him. The player has two separate choices and Arthur's reaction will be different whether the player chooses to greet him or antagonize him. If the player chooses to greet the eugenics supporter, the avatar will say "good morning to you" whereas if he chooses to antagonize him, he will have a more rude expression by saying "you talk a heap of shit, my friend". In free roam, the player will always have to decide what kind of action he wants to take before engaging the conversation. But again, whether the player chooses the friendly option or the unfriendly one, the discourse of the PNJ will not be different.

Indeed, once the interaction is started, the PNJ continues by saying:

- Norris Forsythe: You sir, do you want a pamphlet?

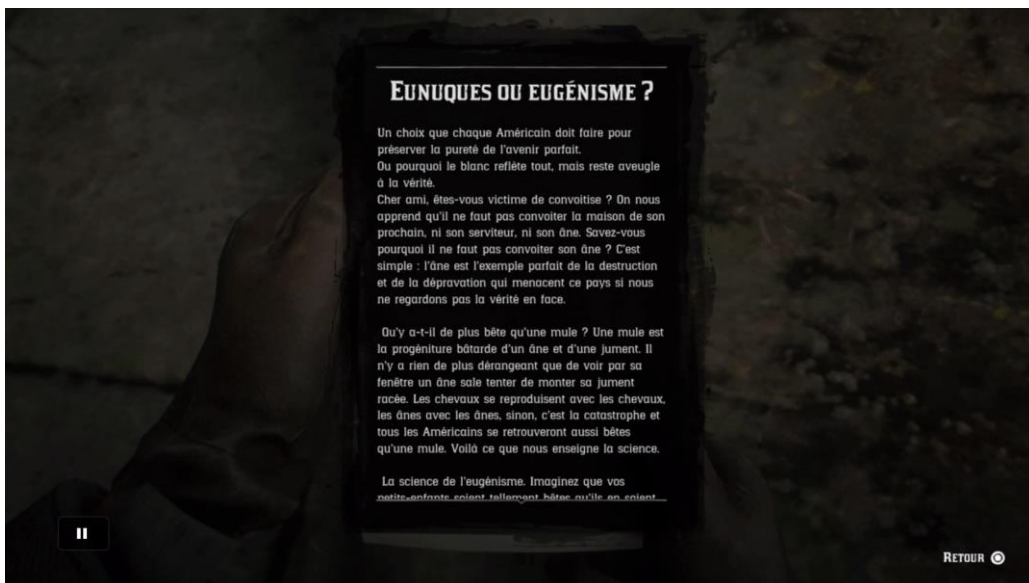
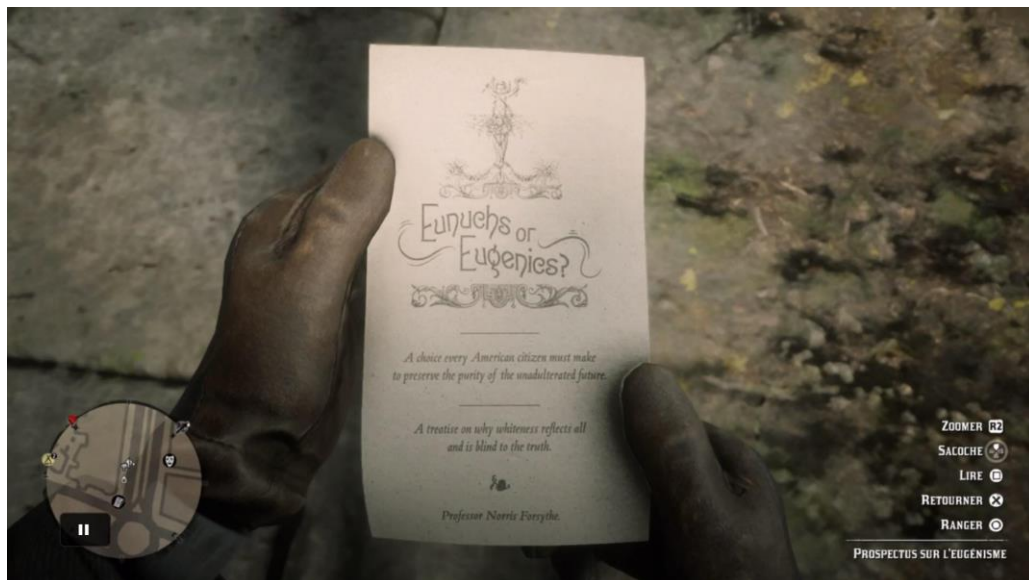
The player has the choice to take it or not. If the pamphlet is taken, the player will receive it in the avatar's inventory and he can have a look at it later on. As we saw in Chapter 1, this piece of paper becomes a component of the game. The NPC then goes on and says:

- Norris Forsythe: It is really interesting stuff. I explain using real science. Why we whites are under attack... and what we must do to fight back.
- Arthur: We're under attack?
- Norris Forsythe: Yes, under attack! People aren't the same, sir... I mean... white people are the same. And all the other races are trying to kill us. I don't want to die, sir.
- Arthur: I got friends who's Mexican. Friends who's Indian. I've known blacks, Irish, Italian... good and bad in all. I've known good white people and bad white people. And above all, dumb white people.
- Norris Forsythe: You sir... are a real fool. How can you possibly believe in equality? I've never heard such nonsense in all my natural born days. This man believes people are equal! Speak for yourself, sir, speak for yourself.
- Arthur: I'm sorry, did you just call me a fool?
- Norris Forsythe: A fool! A fool! A fool!
- Arthur: Come here!

The discourse of Arthur is again here predefined. The player cannot change what is being said and cannot take action because he finds himself in a cut scene. We see here that what the avatar says is completely opposed to what the PNJ says. The Eugenics supporter clearly makes use of “sous-entendu” because he implies here that white people must be protected and that they must avoid co-mingling at all cost. He does not believe in equality and he is convinced that white people are superior. The avatar, in his answer, also implies that what Norris says is completely irrational. That is why Arthur says that there are good and bad people regardless of race or ethnicity.

Moreover, the avatar adds that “has known dumb white people above all,” which completely goes against the discourse of the eugenics supporter. We can feel in this sentence that the avatar is indirectly attacking his opponent, suggesting he is “dumb” too. The avatar is presented as someone progressive, who does not make any distinction between people on the basis of their race but rather of their actions. Procedural rhetoric plays a key role in conveying a discourse here because the player can choose to beat Norris Forsythe and even kill him and the citizens and policemen will not even bat an eye. The environment of the game is also able to convey values; whereas killing other citizens will generate an immediate reaction from the law

enforcement officers, killing the eugenics supporter will not have any impact on the player's honor gauge and he will not even be chased by the police. The fact that the police officers do not chase the player and that the citizens around him/her have no reaction show that the environment is also a key element in the transmission of a discourse.



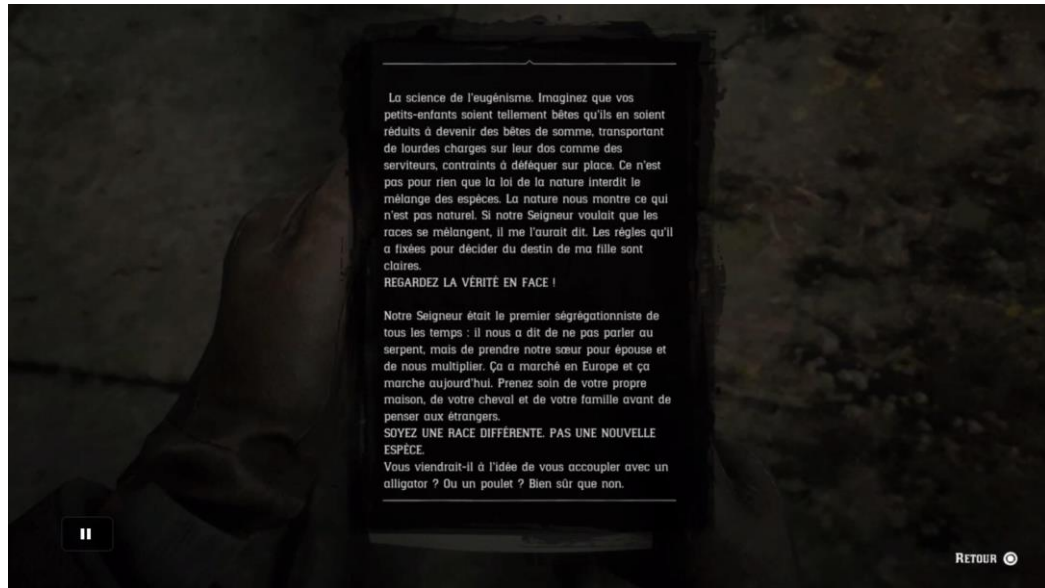


Figure 7-8-9: Pamphlet given by the eugenics supporter.

This pamphlet clearly supports the discourse of Norris Forsythe. The latter compares human co-mingling to animal co-mingling, which inevitably shows that the person the player is talking to is a racist and white supremacist. It is also interesting to notice that this PNJ shares many physical similarities with Adolf Hitler, which reinforces the racist aspect of the PNJ. This similarity is far from being trivial and we definitely see here that the game sets up many aspects in order to develop a discourse and convey values about our period of time.



Figure 10: Norris Forsythe, Hitler's lookalike

However, the player also has the choice not to take the pamphlet. When Norris asks Arthur if he wants the pamphlet, pressing “circle” to trigger the interaction “decline” will generate the following reaction:

- Arthur: No, you pathetic moron.

The conversation will then continue as such:

- Norris: Moron? These are facts. I bet you imagine a world where your grandchildren are subservient to monkeys.
- Arthur: You’re pathetic.

Whether the player chooses to take the pamphlet or not, the reaction of Arthur will be the same. He will clearly have a progressive point of view and he will not agree with what is being said to him. The avatar has an anti-racist position and he is not afraid to show it.

In conclusion, this scene shows us that Rockstar adopts an anti-racist position through several aspects inherent in *Red Dead Redemption II*. The avatar, cut-scenes and interactivity definitely play a role in the development of a discourse about another era. We see that the PNJ Norris Forsythe is constructed upon values that totally opposed to the values of the avatar. The avatar also makes use of “sous-entendus” in order to break his opponent’s discourse. Moreover, the racist aspect is reinforced by the physique of the PNJ since the developers really wanted to associate racism with a figure that everybody knows. Players can also hit and kill this eugenics supporter without suffering from any consequences. This is one the exceptions that can be found in the game because killing any other citizens will have a negative impact on the avatar.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Arthur Argues & Beats Up A Eugenics Supporter In Saint Denis - Red Dead Redemption 2, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoFM_WzvYEc (watched April 14). Here is the link the to video that stages Norris Forsythe and the reactions of the avatar.

2.3 The representation of the Ku Kux Klan

The Ku Kux Klan is also present within the game but we only get to see them twice while free roaming. However, we will see that it is more than enough for the game to develop a discourse about this organized religious group. The birth of the Ku Kux Klan dates back to the end of the American Civil War in 1865. The Northern States, victorious, put in place a law regarding the abolition of slavery leading to the release of more than four millions black slaves. However, not everyone was satisfied.

Dans un Sud profondément traumatisé par la perspective de la fin du suprématisme blanc et humilié par la défaite, des groupes refusent cette nouvelle donne.¹²⁹

Consequently, the KKK aims to restore white supremacy and fight against the establishment of equality between white and black people. The first time the player will encounter them, the members will be gathered in a forest and will try to set a cross on fire to welcome their newest member. The player can decide to act whenever he wants to. For the sake of this study, we will fully discuss the ceremony in order to analyze what is being said. However, the player can perfectly arrive and kill everyone without paying attention or even pass by the ceremony without stopping. He can attend the ceremony without entering a cut scene, which means that he is not restricted in his movements and, as the player gets closer to the place where the ceremony is being held, we can hear the following sentences:

- Stranger: Settle down, settle down, settle down, my friends, settle down... because we are here today for a very special occasion. It is imperative that we re-establish sanity and supremacy before it is too late! Our numbers are waning, thanks to the fools in Congress and their ludicrous ideas! But today, we grow stronger! As we anoint a new brother... into our sacred cause. Please step forward and kneel.
- Stranger 2: Alright.
- Stranger: Do you choose to accept the light?
- Stranger 2: Yes, sir!

¹²⁹ SOS Racisme, *24 décembre 1865 : le Ku Klux Klan est fondé*, <https://sos-racisme.org/1865-lekkk-est-fonde/> (accessed August 13, 2019).

“In a South deeply traumatized by the prospect of the end of white supremacy and humiliated by defeat, several groups refuse this new outcome.” (pers. trans.)

- Stranger: Yeah, oh, here we go. Let the eternal light shine bright!

As expected, the ceremony ends up tragically because when the newcomer set the cross on fire, his robe started to burn too without him noticing it directly. One of his friends will come to help but he will also catch fire and the other members will panic and start running everywhere. This scene really aims at ridiculing the KKK and, unlike the great majority of other PNJs in free roaming, you will be able to shoot them without losing honor.¹³⁰ It must be said that shooting them is not compulsory; the player can just witness the scene and does not have to do anything. Rockstar will not “punish” the player for killing KKK members whereas the game will decrease your honor if you kill simple passersby. On the contrary, killing members of this organized group will grant you honor, which definitely says a lot about Rockstar’s opinion on the KKK. Indeed, the player can chase the members who are running away and kill them. Every time he kills one of the KKK members, he will see his honor go up.

This scene clearly wishes to mock the KKK because the player does not even have to act to ruin the ceremony, they do it by themselves. The master of ceremonies begins by saying “It is imperative that we re-establish sanity and supremacy before it is too late! Our numbers are waning, thanks to the fools in Congress and their ludicrous ideas!” This sentence clearly refers to the imposition of an egalitarian policy following the outcome of the Secession War. Indeed, the North put an end to slavery and, inevitably, the white supremacists took a big hit.¹³¹ We saw in the very beginning of this chapter how the American Civil War gave birth to the extreme religious group. The word “re-establish” is not trivial here as it echoes what we have just said, because it presupposes that it was once established but it is not anymore. The master of ceremony then delivers a great discourse by saying “Today, we grow stronger! As we anoint a new brother... into our sacred cause.” This great discourse is quickly ridiculed because that night, they did not grow stronger since they lost several members.

¹³⁰ This is a link to a video that illustrates these words : https://hitek.fr/actualite/red-dead-redemption-2-tuer-membres-kkk-criminel_17737

¹³¹ Marine Gasc, *Ku Klux Klan, l'histoire de la violence raciale*, [online] <http://www.racontemoilhistoire.com/2017/03/ku-klux-klan/> (accessed July 26, 2019).



Figure 11: The ceremony just before it went wrong. We can see here that the new member is on the edge of catching fire by himself.

Later on, after this first encounter, the player will meet the KKK a second time during his adventure. However, this time, there will be only three members of the clan, as a result of the accident in the forest. Two of them will be trying to erect a cross and the third one will be shouting at them. When the player arrives on the location, he does not enter a cut scene, like the first scene. He is thus free to act and do whatever he wants but the interaction here plays a key role because it is the interaction that will lead the way to the next step of the scene. Indeed, once the player presses “square” or “circle” to talk to the members, the avatar will say something that will surprise the three men, which will make the cross fall on two of them. Once the cross fell on them and killed them, the player will receive honor, even though he did nothing concrete to kill them. The last KKK member alive, upset, will try to kill the player, but he can leave him be or just kill him too.



Figure 12: The members of the KKK simply killed themselves and the player does not have to do anything. We see on the right of the screen that the player earned honor for just watching them being crushed by the cross.

However, the player can also decide not to trigger any interaction but the cross will still fall on the two men. However, this time, the last member alive will not be mad at you and he will not try to kill you. He will say:

- Have some respect. Just leave me be.

This sentence definitely generates pity but still, the only interaction made possible is to antagonize him. When the player presses “circle” to antagonize, Arthur will say the following:

- Well, shit. Guess they got what was coming.

This sentence will grant the player more honor and it will really upset the KKK representative who will say:

- Corruption personified. I will cut you down!

He will then come to kill the player but he can be easily neutralized. If the player decides to loot the bodies, he will receive different letters, making even more fun of the KKK. The body of the leader group has a secret letter (component of the game) called “Meeting notes”. This document is very funny because it ridicules way more the KKK with the help of useless notes.

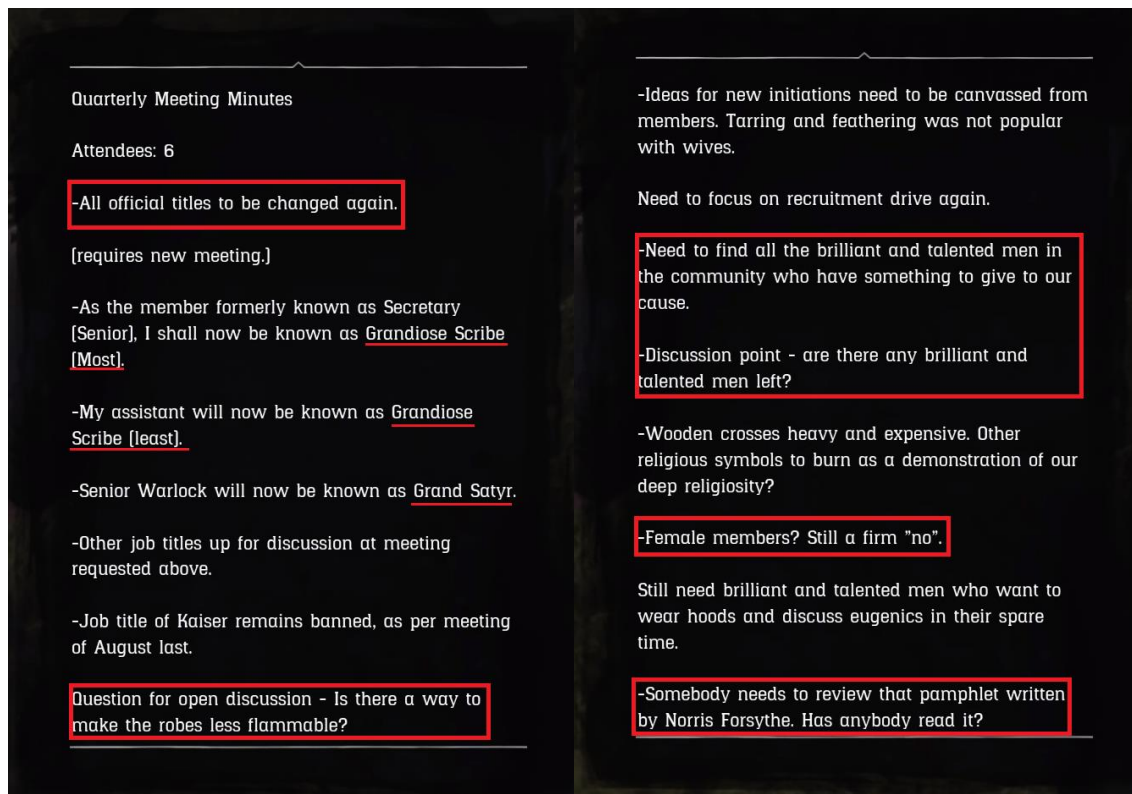


Figure 12.1: Pages from the Meeting notes of the KKK member.

These figures show how this organization is far from being credible. The developers made it look it was ruled by children. They give themselves great names but they accomplish very little. They share a common background with the racist of Saint-Denis, and above all, they do not want women in their group. Everything about them cannot be taken seriously and the developers did what they could to make fun of the KKK.

Earning honor for killing members of the KKK says a lot about the procedural rhetoric of the game that we saw at the very beginning of the previous chapter since it precisely elaborates arguments through the processes of the game. Every time the player encountered them, they always managed to mess things up without the intervention of the player. They manage to ridicule themselves with the help of no one.

Rockstar's actions towards the KKK says a lot about the ideology *Red Dead Redemption II* conveys and what this video games producer think about organized

religious groups. Every time we encounter someone linked to a precise religious group, they are being mocked.

These examples of the KKK show us how *Red Dead Redemption II* can convey a discourse regarding religious groups and how they are being mocked thanks to the procedural rhetoric. We saw that the KKK is represented as a group that has huge projects, but that is clumsy at the same time and that cannot be taken seriously. The player does not feel a threat coming from these people and he can get rid of them very easily. Procedural rhetoric plays a key role here because it manages to convey a discourse simply through the processes of the game.

2.4 The representations of foreign people

2.4.1 The French

Since *RDR2* is set up the early XXth century, it is no surprise we can find people from all around the globe in the different cities of the game. Indeed, many people from Europe immigrated to America during the second half of the XIXth century. The player can come across people from different cultures, races and these differences are directly visible on screen. As we saw in the previous chapters, the player must be able to define who is who and what is what. This is why the game sometimes uses stereotypes in order to allow the player to identify the other PNJs. These stereotypes are considered as “mental shortcuts” but we will see that they are not as harmless as they seem.

One of the first characters that is really striking for our study is the French painter Charles Châtenay. The player will get to know him in Saint-Denis, where you will have to help him throughout several missions regarding his controversial painting style. Châtenay is a misunderstood painter, who left Paris because his art was not welcomed there. He is the perfect stereotype of the Frenchman who speaks English. However, we must add that his English is very good but his strong French accent makes the character very funny.



Figure 13: Charles Châtenay during the first encounter.

The player will meet him for the first time in a bar, in which Châtenay will ask you to offer him a drink. The player will have no other choice but to do so because he finds himself caught in a cinematic. The conversation is conducted as such:

- Châtenay: Hey, buy me a drink, mon ami.

The player has to interact with him in order to go further in the conversation. It is also interesting to note that the player cannot “antagonize” Charles. The only option available is “greet”.

- Arthur: Sure, what you want?
- Châtenay: Brandy.
- Arthur: Two brandies, bud. (to the barman)
- [...]
- Châtenay: Thank you. Santé. It is quite a country you’re building here, eh?
- Arthur: What, me personally?
- Châtenay: I don’t know, what do you do?
- Arthur: Mostly I shoot people.
- Châtenay: How very American of you... I love it.
- Arthur: What do you do?
- Châtenay: Mostly I pose, I show off, I complain.
- Arthur: How very French.

- Châtenay: I know, I am ridiculous. I have been all over the world. I have seen the sights and I have discovered the one eternal truth. That I am a prize... How do you say? Whole ass
- Arthur: Asshole?
- Châtenay: That too... that too.
- Arthur: Well, at least you have some self-knowledge.

The rest of the conversation is just them learning about each other. We learn that Châtenay is a painter and that he left Europe because his paintings were not accepted in Paris. Arthur just asks him if he misses Paris and the painter answers the following:

- Mmmh, that smelly, filthy place with old buildings and ghosts and shit and French people? I have that right here.

What is really striking here is that all these stereotypes can still be applied in today's society. Not only have we stereotypical features of the French people but also the American ones. When Châtenay says "It is quite a country you're building here, eh?", he refers to the rise in power of the United States, regarding for example the flourishing economy, the demographic dynamism and much more. In the XXth century, the United-States are indeed becoming a powerful nation.

Depuis la fin de la guerre de Sécession en 1865, les États-Unis ont connu une croissance économique accélérée fondée sur l'essor de l'industrie lourde et des biens de consommation; la pose de cinq lignes ferroviaires transcontinentales (conquête de l'Ouest); l'essor du capitalisme soutenu par des républicains qui dominant la vie politique jusqu'en 1914.¹³²

The conversation then goes on to talk about what the two men do in life and this is precisely where stereotypes are used. Arthur, who is American, says that he mostly shoots people. His answer is true because he will often be asked to shoot people during missions but we cannot help thinking that the United States is forcefully linked to the use of weapons. It is really funny here that the avatar summarizes

¹³² L'Étudiant, *Les États-Unis, l'expansion du XXème siècle*, <https://www.letudiant.fr/boite-a-docs/.../les-etats-unis-l-expansion-du-xxe-siecle-2757> (accessed August 13, 2019).

himself as “I shoot most of the time” because it is often one of the first thoughts people have when they think about the USA.

Châtenay also summarizes himself as someone who poses, shows off and complains. When most people think about the French, these characteristics often come to mind. Charles Châtenay also describes himself as a “whole-ass” and an “asshole”. These aspects of his personality will be highlighted during the missions the player will have to do for him — missions that will bring to the forefront many stereotypes regarding the French through the character of Châtenay. For example, the player will first have to save the painter because he had an affair with someone’s wife. Her husband eventually found out and decided to kill him. To justify himself, Charles Châtenay will say that he is an artist and that he must do what he feels.

Later on, he will invite the player to one of his exhibitions, which will quickly go out of hand because his paintings were only based on naked bodies of men and women who were present at the exhibition or had relatives that knew the models personally. The relatives will quickly notice and they will be so upset that the painter will be forced to flee the city. The scene of the exhibition unfolds as such:

- Charles: Look at these idiots
- Mabel: Excuse me, Mr Châtenay... Couldn't you have painted some drawers on her?
- Charles: Madame, I paint her in her natural state as she was and will be in paradise.
- Mabel: There's nothing natural about that.
- Charles: Clothes are civilization... repression... death. To be naked is to be free, innocent, alive. Like Buddha said, you know, we are all just here to fuck.
- Mabel: Well, that explains the decadence of those hottentots.
- Civilian 4: Hey, you got a picture of my wife here... in her... delicates!
- Wife: Henry... is that your behind? Why would you be showing it to that man?
- Husband 2: That's my mamma. As nude as the day she was born.

The avatar starts laughing and several people start to fight. Arthur must protect Charles and bring him to safety. When that is done, Châtenay says:

- Charles: Art should test people, push them. I thought I was a fraud, a no-talent brush washer. Now, I'm not sure. We provoke emotions, no?
- Arthur: You keep provoking emotions like that and all your canvases will have punch holes through 'em.
- Charles: I told you I was a whole ass.
- Arthur: You did, and you are. Now maybe go be an asshole somewhere else for a while.
- Charles: Ah, here we are. I know a lady over here, she may let me stay for a while [...] Mon ange, ma colombe, it's me!

The character can definitely be summarized by the different adjectives used above and the stereotype of the Frenchman is continuously reinforced throughout the different missions the player has to do with him and the environment linked to these. It is also interesting to note that he uses French words sometimes when he speaks, such as "mon ami," "mon ange," "ma colombe." There is, without a doubt, a will to also satirize the French and to exacerbate their romanticism to make it look absurd.

To conclude, Charles is someone very romantic, who definitely loves women and he is not afraid to act like "an asshole." These stereotypes are in a way exaggerated and remediatized through the different missions, dialogues and the characters himself. He embodies the perfect image many people have of Frenchmen.¹³³

2.4.2 The Italians

The fourth chapter the game will be dedicated to one of the main antagonists of the game, namely: Angelo Bronte and his Italian mafia. It goes without saying that stereotypes over Italian are conveyed throughout this chapter. The player will have to deal with him because Bronte kidnapped the youngest boy of the band.

¹³³ Red Dead Redemption 2 - Funny Art Gallery Scene / The Artist's Way, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFH5P4U2RBk> (watched July 18, 2019). The part that interests us starts at 1.00 min.

To begin with, before the player can talk and interact with Mr Bronte, he has to find him in the city of Saint-Denis. To do so, he will have to do a mission where he looks for information in a bar. A random PNJ will eventually come near us and say:

- Stranger: Angelo Bronte? Mister Big? Mister Italian-spaghetti-eating-long-streak-of piss-big? He makes my skin crawl... Some swarthy cocksucker... You know what I mean friend?¹³⁴
- Arthur: Where can I find him?
- Stranger: Oh, I-I reckon you talk to them kids in the alley... They'll know how to get... Oh and, friend, Y-you be careful now. Immigrants, they're not to be trusted.

The very first information the player receives is a collection of stereotypes over Italian people since we saw that Bronte is described as “Mister-Italian-spaghetti-eating.” This is one of the first things most people think about when they hear the word. Most people will inevitably make a link between Italy and spaghetti because it is the easiest mental shortcut for them. This conversation gives the player an idea of how the PNJ he is about to meet will be. It is also relevant to examine the last sentence of the stranger in the bar, which is: “Immigrants, they're not to be trusted.” As we saw previously, many people from Europe came to the New Continent and there was therefore a great demographic diversity. This sentence is quite funny because the PNJ who says that is also an immigrant. However, in this case, his sentence will make sense later in the game because Angelo Bronte will trick the gang and lead them into a trap.

The player will eventually find where Bronte lives and the very first encounter sets the tone. As soon as the player enters the house with two of his fellow members, Italian music starts playing, which reinforces the Italian aspect of the scene and, more particularly, the fact that they are related to the mafia. The player can directly identify Angelo Bronte, because of the way the character is dressed and the way he talks, acts etc. Indeed, his first sentences are in Italian and are the following:

- Angelo Bronte (in Italian): Who are these clowns?
- Bronte's bodyguard (in Italian): They've come about the boy we took?

¹³⁴ « Monsieur plein-aux-as ? Monsieur plein-aux-as-bouffeur-de-spaghettis ? Ce type me fiche les jetons, un salopard de basané, si vous voyez ce que je veux dire. » (Official translation of the game)

- Angelo Bronte (in Italian): With money?
- Dutch: Why do you take his son?
- Angelo Bronte: Excuse me?
- Dutch: I said, why did you take his son? We ain't got no problems with you sir, nor you with us but if you wanna start one, there is gonna be a lot of folks dead in this room before it is done
- Angelo Bronte: So you walk into my city, stinking of shit and looking like this and you come into my house, before you have a bath and you tell me how to act? You ask me to show compassion? Have I not shown you almost infinite compassion already by simply allowing you to breathe in my presence?

The rest of the conversation is Dutch trying to find a peaceful solution and eventually sympathizing with Bronte. What is interesting is that Bronte is the personification of many stereotypes regarding the Italians. He belongs to the mafia, he bribes the mayor of the city, he is a good speaker, he uses his hand to talk when he gets upset, he has his hair slicked backwards and he is dressed in a very elegant way.

Again, we see here that these stereotypes are remediatized thanks to many aspects inherent in video games and these stereotypes are the same used in today's society. The PNJ himself clearly participates in the remediatization of such mental shortcuts but not only. The dialogues between characters also participate in the reinforcement of such representations. We just have to look at the discussion between Arthur and the stranger in the bar.



Figure 14: Angelo Bronte the first time the player meets him.

To sum up, the game represents many different nationalities with regards to their stereotypes. We already tackled British eccentricity in Chapter 2 but there is much more to be said regarding the demographic diversity of the game. However, we chose to tackle several of the most developed nationalities in the game, the others having too little information to be discussed. We thus see here that Rockstar chose to represent many characters according to the stereotypes linked to their nationality. The two examples that we saw in this subchapter illustrates this perfectly. Charles Châtenay and Angelo Bronte summarize the stereotypes most people have of their countries, and these are remediatized through important aspects of the game. We just saw that the way the character is created is important to convey such stereotypes, but the missions that the player will have to do for them also convey interesting information. We must not forget that the game world, the environment and the PNJs also play a key role in the transmission of such ready-made ideas.¹³⁵

2.5 The animal cause

With the current climate of animal and climate protection, it is not surprising that Rockstar has chosen to incorporate different elements regarding animal advocacy into its game. Indeed, the game conveys a well-knit ideology regarding animals and their defense and preservation. This ideology can be found not only in the main missions, but also while the player is free-roaming within the world of the game.

¹³⁵ Red Dead Redemption 2 - Mission #44 - Angelo Bronte, a Man of Honor [Gold Medal], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emBZ6cqeQxE> (watched May 17, 2019). The conversation starts at 1.41min.

To begin with, the player will see his honor decreased if he kills too many wild animals. Indeed, the game allows the player to kill wild animals, but only to recover their meat or skins. Killing too many animals in a row will decrease the player's honor gauge because the game considers that such amount is too much and unnecessary. The player does not need to kill so many wildlife creatures to be nourished. Again, this practice is embedded in the procedural rhetoric of the game, which says a lot about Rockstar's opinions over animal defense. The fact that the player will be "punished" if he kills too many animals clearly shows that the developers advocate for the animal cause. Since *RDR2* is a game in which animals can reappear endlessly, it is not compulsory for them to include such rule in the gameplay but they still implemented a way to defend the game's wildlife creatures. However, this aspect is not indicated to the player and he has to find it by himself.

However, it must be said that there are several exceptions to that rule, which regard different types of animals, among which horses and dogs. Horses are very present in the game since they are one of the player's only means of transport and, if one decides to shoot directly a horse in free-roam, honor will inevitably be lost. Players cannot receive any meat or any skin from a horse and only the saddle bags can be looted. Again, we see here that killing innocent animals is not tolerated by the processes of the game and killing one of them will lead to bad consequences for the player. These consequences can also be applied to dogs but these are far more severe. Indeed, shooting a dog is made possible in *Red Dead Redemption II* but the player will not be able to walk out safe of the town. If there are any bystanders who witnessed the scene, they will immediately run to warn the sheriff and he will immediately come and ask you to leave the town. If the player does not follow the sheriff's instructions, the latter will start to shoot at you and so will the other citizens of the town. Even though the player can leave and pay his bounty off, the characters in the game will still hold a grudge against him. They will remember what was done.

Moreover, during his journey in the game, the player will eventually come across a photographer called Albert Mason who will bring you a series of missions called "Arcadia for Amateurs." He will ask you to help him take the perfect pictures of animals. What is also very interesting is that is the player skins an animal near him,

he will say “a collector of pelts? I hope only in self-defense.” Mason also vows a great disdain to trophy hunters, referring to them as “our greatest predators.”

The player will have to do five different missions with Mason and each one of these will stage a different animal. Throughout these missions, we will understand that Albert Mason is a paradoxical character. Indeed, on the one hand, he is the personification of the defense of wild animals but on the other hand, animals are being killed for the sake of his photos (but not every time). The very first example takes place during the second mission the player has to do for him called “Arcadia for Amateurs II.” Albert asks Arthur to protect him while he tries to take several pictures of wolves. Unfortunately, the wolves eventually spot the poor photographer and the player has to kill them in order to protect him. Afterwards, the player can skin the wolves he has just killed and this is where Mason says the following: “a collector of pelts? I hope only in self-defense.” It is clearly ironic since the wolves died because of him and it definitely highlights the opposition between what is said and what is done.

Similarly, two missions later, the player has to help Albert to take photos of alligators without being eaten. The conversation unfolds as such:

- Arthur: They creep up on you, you know?
- Albert: Mr Morgan.
- [...]
- Arthur: What are you working on?
- Albert: Do you know anything about alligators?
- Arthur: Only the basics... avoid them wherever possible.
- Albert: well, did you know that in the last fifty years, we've killed ninety percent?
- Arthur: You say that like it makes you sad?
- Albert: They're beautiful creatures.
- Arthur: Let's see how you speak when one of them's got you in a death roll.
- Albert: Yes, I will make some creature a very happy lunch one of these days.
- Arthur: Well, let's try and avoid that from happening today. Well, you stay there you'll get a great shot then you'll get eaten.

- Albert: What a way to go.
- [...]
- Arthur: The ten percent who survived, they're the nasty ones.

Arthur and Albert then climb on a boat and they start their search for alligators in the swamps. When they find the first one, they say the following:

- Albert: Oh, look... on that little beach... boars. If we're in luck, an alligator won't be far away.
- Arthur: Saving alligators, but you don't mind that pork chop getting butchered?
- Albert: The gator, it's got it. Quick, quick, I must get this shot.
- [...]
- Albert: Last year, they brought 10,000 skins out of the swamps of Lemoyne alone.
- Arthur: The gators got some catching up to do then.
- Albert: Cases, trunks, shoes, boots, belts... bibles even. They'll make anything out of gator leather that the market desires.
- [...]

This conversation includes several elements that are particularly relevant for our study. This conversation establishes an indirect link between the game and what is currently happening in our contemporary era regarding the animal condition. We must also add that the game is historically correct regarding the near extinction of alligators in the XIXth century. It is true that there was only ten percent remaining at that time but the situation nowadays is way better than it was.¹³⁶ However, the fact that Albert says “well, did you know that in the last fifty years, we've killed ninety percent?” and “Last year, they brought 10,000 skins out of the swamps of Lemoyne alone” is not trivial. What was happening with the gators at that time is happening today but on a greater scale. The fact that concrete numbers are given raises awareness regarding the damages men can cause to the environment. In addition, as

¹³⁶ Elahe Izadi, “We saved the alligators from extinction — then moved into their territory”, *The Washington post*, June 17, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2016/06/17/we-saved-the-alligators-from-extinction-then-moved-into-their-territory/?noredirect=on> (accessed August 13, 2019).

we saw earlier, the game takes place in the XIXth century and at that time, the United States are in great economic growth and it is therefore not surprising that Albert mentions the needs of the market with his sentence “Cases, trunks, shoes, boots, belts... bibles even. They’ll make anything out of gator leather that the market desires.” We also understand that the avatar is not very fond of alligators since he does not see them as beautiful creatures but as a threat for his life. Arthur Morgan is someone very practical, and he does not see the problem if alligators are disappearing because it would be one less problem for him. We can understand that when he says “You say that like it makes you sad?” to Albert when he talked about their near extinction.

Throughout Albert, the game also seeks to criticize the hypocrisy of certain people regarding the saving of animals. On the one hand, Mr Mason really wants alligators to be saved and less hunted but, on the other hand, he does not mind the boar being eaten alive. When Albert says “Oh, look... on that little beach... boars. If we’re in luck, an alligator won’t be far away” Arthur directly answers “Saving alligators, but you don’t mind that pork chop getting butchered?” What is surprising here is that Albert does not answer Arthur’s question and he waits for the boar to be attacked to talk again. This inconsistency is also to be seen nowadays, with people who campaign for animal rights, who say that killing animals is wrong but at the same time, these are the same people who eat meat. Since Rockstar is known to make satirical games that denounce the flaws of society, it would not be surprising that they purposely chose to tackle this problem with the help of the PNJ Albert Mason.

The animal condition is an important topic tackled by *Red Dead Redemption II*. Rockstar managed to convey their ideology throughout the gameplay by punishing the player if he kills too many animals in a row, or animals he cannot get anything from. The character of Albert Mason is also very relevant because throughout his missions and dialogues, he highlights a problematic that is at the heart of our contemporary society. We see here again that many aspects inherent in video games, put together, are able to develop a discourse about another era.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Red Dead Redemption 2 Albert Mason Alligator Mission, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdXrYVOivki> (watched July 12, 2019).

2.6 Random conversation between two PNJs

While wandering in the world of *RDR2*, the player might overhear several conversations between PNJs. They are so many of them that it would take a huge amount of time to analyze each interaction. Some of these are particularly interesting for our study because they do also convey discourses and ideologies. Such conversation between PNJs are triggered when the player passes by and can choose to listen to what is being said, or leave without paying attention. One particular interaction features two PNJs having diametrically opposed points of view regarding the trial of a black man. Once the player comes close to these two characters, the conversation starts as such:

- Stranger 1: It ain't as bad as you made out there.
- Stranger 2: Bad? They worse than worse.
- Stranger 1: You always was one for the gossip, Jethro Minglethorpe. Gossip, gossip, gossip. But as usual, you're spreading lies.
- Stranger 2: Lies?
- Stranger 1: Every fool knows the charges were trumped up.
- Stranger 2: But the darky killed a white man.
- Stranger 1: Jimmy Holdacre¹³⁸ had a weak heart. He died of a heart attack.
- Stranger 2: Nonsense.
- Stranger 1: And Sampson Black was set up. Everyone knows Judge Amory took a bribe.
- Stranger 2: You don't believe that? Do you?
- Stranger 1: Sure.
- Stranger 2: And you call me a gossip?
- [...]

What we have here are two different visions of the world, one being deeply racist and the other one being progressive. Stranger 1 is convinced that the black men did nothing wrong and that he was set up whereas Stranger 2 is sure that Jimmy Holdacre was killed by that black man, simply because he is black. The worldview of Stranger 2 is the one that can be linked with our contemporary world because she

¹³⁸ He is an old white man who used to live in "Rhodes", a town of the game.

bases her judgment on facts and not on race. Black people were still discriminated in the early XIXth century and it is not surprising that Stranger 2 calls the black man “darky”. Stranger 2 is part of the worldview of the KKK and Norris Forsythe whereas Stranger 1 definitely shares the avatar’s worldview. This conversation can be seen as an opposition between conservative values and modern values.

Here again, we see that a discourse is conveyed thanks to several aspects that can be found within the game. The environment here plays an important role because the conversation is part of the environment of the game and is triggered when the player passes by. The different characters also represent a specific worldview.

2.7 The conflict between the Red Skins and the United States Army

It would very difficult to make a western game taking place in the early XIXth century without tackling the conflict between the Redskins and the Army. This conflict echoes what we saw at the beginning of this chapter regarding the Manifest Destiny doctrine. The expansion of the US territory was made a cost, because many North Americans regions were already populated by Redskins, who were killed in large numbers. The perfect example of this conflict is the “Wounded Knee massacre,” during which the American Army killed 300 Indians.

Cet épisode tragique est considéré comme la fin des guerres indiennes, mais il est aussi devenu le symbole des atrocités qui ont marqué les conflits entre les colons blancs et les peuples indigènes.¹³⁹

In this Chapter, we will see how the developers of the game managed to give representations of both sides thanks to specific scenes and missions. We will see that the Redskins are represented as a peaceful people, who have been trying to conclude peace treaties with the high authorities of America but the Army has always succeeded in making them obsolete. On the one hand, we will see how the stereotypes regarding the Wapiti Indians are remediatized, through repressive authorities such as the Army and the Pinkerton Agency. On the other hand, we will

¹³⁹ Histoire pour tous, *Le massacre de Wounded Knee*, <https://www.histoire-pour-tous.fr/dossiers/3422-le-massacre-de-wounded-knee-29-decembre-1890.html> (accessed August 13, 2019).

see how these stereotypes are deconstructed through the avatar and the links he maintains with the Indians.

The very first scene that is relevant for our study takes place in Chapter 3. This scene is a foretaste of the prejudices that American authorities have against Indians and it features a conversation between Dutch and a representative of the Pinkerton agency namely: Agent Milton. The Pinkerton agency found where Dutch and his group were living and they decided to enter the camp to have a discussion and offer them a deal:

- Dutch: And to what do we owe the pleasure, Agent Moron?
- Milton: I don't know if you're aware but this is a civilized land now. We didn't kill all them savages only to allow the likes of you to act like human dignity and basic decency was outmoded or not yet invented. This thing, it's done.
- Dutch: This place ain't no such thing as civilized. It's man so in love with greed, he has forgotten himself and found only appetites.
- Milton: And as a consequence that lets you take what you please, kill whom you please and hang the rest of us? Who made you the messiah to these lost souls you've led so horribly astray?
- Dutch: I'm nothing but a seeker, Mr Milton.
- Milton: You ain't much of anything more than a killer, Mr Van der Linde.

We have here a first overview of how the authorities consider the Redskins, and how the civilized land is spreading West, making it more and more difficult for the outlaws to act however they want to. Milton implies that killing the savages was necessary to make this land civilized. We have here again two different worldviews regarding civilization. "I'm nothing but a seeker, Mr Milton": The way Dutch talks reminds us that he wants to seek a place far from civilization, where nobody will tell him how to act. His sentence "This place ain't no such thing as civilized. It's man so in love with greed, he has forgotten himself and found only appetites" is quite paradoxical because he is the most greedy man of the group. He will always want to do one last hit before leaving but his greediness is what will start the fall of the group. Milton's answer "You ain't much of anything more than a killer, Mr Van der Linde" is also paradoxical because he just said that the savages of this land had to be

killed to be able to create a civilized land, which makes him also a killer.¹⁴⁰ The term “savages” is a very strong stereotype regarding the Indians of America. The newspaper *La Liberté* gives the perfect example of how Indians were, and are still considered by some people:

C’est le stéréotype de l’Indien d’Amérique, ce «sauvage» rejetant la «civilisation» lors de la conquête de l’Ouest, se méfiant des visages pâles comme de la chaude-pisse, poussant des cris de guerre en pratiquant la danse du scalp. C’est ce ténébreux Peau-Rouge coiffé de plumes, aussi combatif qu’insoumis, fier et rusé, rarement ami du Blanc, souvent cantonné au rôle d’éclaireur pour la cavalerie. Imposée par des centaines de westerns hollywoodiens, l’image a été revalorisée dans quelques films politiquement corrects, mais la caricature continue de coller à la peau des autochtones des 310 réserves des Etats-Unis et 2300 réserves canadiennes, éclipsant toujours largement la réalité historique et en particulier leur engagement au service de la nation.¹⁴¹

As mentioned above, this stereotype is precisely conveyed by the law enforcement authorities the avatar will come across. We will see that the Army’s ideology regarding the Redskins is the same as Milton. They consider the Redskins as savages and they are not afraid to treat them as such. Chapter 6 will ask the player to help the Wapiti Indians to cope with the various illegal army attacks. The representative of the Army, Colonel Favours, has links to oil industry tycoons and the reasons behind these illegal attacks are the following:

Favours is given a proposition by Leviticus Cornwall (one of the leader of the oil industry in the game) to drive the Indians off the reservation, which is allegedly oil-rich. Agreeing to it, Favours began taking underhand measures to do so, such as confiscating the tribe's horses and deliberately withholding vaccines from the reservation.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Red Dead Redemption 2 Milton Threatens Dutch & The Gang, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=im_0j7Vuu_4 (watched May 17, 2019).

¹⁴¹ Pascal Fleury, « L’Indien, ce vaillant soldat américain », *La Liberté*, February 2, 2019, <https://www.laliberte.ch/dossiers/histoire-vivante/articles/l-indien-ce-vaillant-soldat-americain-473638> (accessed August 6, 2019).

“This is the stereotype of the American Indian, this "savage" rejecting "civilization" during the conquest of the West, suspicious of pale faces like clamshells, shouting war cries while practicing the scalp dance. It is this dark Red Skin with feathers, as combative as rebellious, proud and cunning, rarely a friend of the White, often confined to the role of scout for the cavalry. Imposed by hundreds of Hollywood westerns, the image has been revalued in a few politically correct films, but the cartoon continues to stick to the natives of the 310 US and 2300 Canadian reserves, still largely eclipsing historical reality and in particular their commitment to serving the nation.” (pers. trans.)

¹⁴² Red Dead Wiki, *Henry Favours*, [online], https://redded.fandom.com/wiki/Henry_Favours (accessed August 6, 2019).

Favours is willing to make profit out of the Indians, which is why he does not hesitate to humiliate them in many ways. However, the leader of the Wapiti Indians, called Rains Fall, will do everything he can in order to conclude a peace treaty. The avatar will eventually join forces with him and he will try to help as best as he can. In a mission called *The fine Art of Conversation*, Arthur will meet Rains Fall in order to escort him to an appointment with Colonel Favours and the objective of this encounter is to reach an agreement between the two parties. However, before going, Rains Fall says:

- Rains Fall: Colonel Favours has agreed to a meeting, to discuss, and maybe resolve his alleged grievances and mine. Now, he has lied to me times than I care to remember but maybe this time, he must want peace. Why could he possibly want to humiliate us further?
- Arthur: We got words for this kind, but they're colloquial.
- [...]
- Rain Falls: I am not asking for very much. But when our people are sick and hungry and we find our medicine and supplies are being deliberately withheld, how can we not view that as something personal? When they destroy our sacred sites?

This conversation highlights the fact that the Indians are constantly persecuted and that Favours do not wish to conclude any treaties with them. Arthur shows here that he does not agree with what is being done by the Army and one of his fellow members convinced him to escort the Indians at the meeting. Once the group arrives, the conversation unfolds as such:

- Favours: Listen, Mr, uh...
- Rains Fall: Chief
- Favours: Yes, uh, Mr... I can't say that silly name.
- Rains Fall: In English they call me Rains Fall.
- Favours: Yes, yes, I'm sure they do. Listen, we're all Americans here...; and, we... want an outcome, but quite frankly... quite frankly, I'm confused. You men are ... little more than criminals, in my opinion. Keep breaking peace

treaties... we've made. Causing disturbances in everybody's life. But I pride myself on being a gentleman. Really, I do. But there are limits.

This scene shows us that Favours is treating the Indians as less than nothing. He does not bother saying Rains Fall's name correctly, he tells him that they have been breaking peace treaties but it is the colonel who has done everything to make them react. Any excuse is good to charge them. The way the game depicts Rains Fall is far from the stereotypes that have been conveyed throughout history. Rains Fall is presented as someone who wants peace, who is really against any form of violence and who does everything he can to stop the war between the two parties. He becomes friends with Arthur, but he and his people are still persecuted by the Army.¹⁴³



Figure 15: The way Rain Falls is depicted is far from the stereotypes conveyed.

Again, these stereotypes are deconstructed through the missions the player will do for the Indians. We are far from the savages described by the authorities. We just have to look at the way Rain Falls is dressed: he does not have any paint on him, has no aggressive behavior and he is always willing to find a peaceful solution. The problem comes from Favours, who only cares about his own personal gains. We see that men who swore to defend their people are ready to “sacrifice” them for the sake of money. As we saw, dialogues also participate in the deconstruction of such

¹⁴³ Red Dead Redemption 2 - Mission #77 - The Fine Art of Conversation [Gold Medal], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYGgzHvKRC4&t=419s> (watched July 18, 2019).

stereotypes because they show that the leader of the Wapiti Indians has no desire to fight.

Consequently, the problematic of the Indians offers two different worldviews. The opinion the Army has over the Indians is the conservative one, considering Indians as a threat and as savages. The time the player spends with Rain Falls will show him that it is absolutely not the case and that they are far from being savages. The game conveys a discourse that really aims at deconstructing the detrimental stereotypes of the Indians. What the player is shown throughout the missions he does alongside the Indians is positive and it goes against everything that is said by the authorities.

3. Conclusion

Throughout this work, we saw that *RDR2* manages to convey a discourse over a specific period of time, different from the one the player is immersed in. When we first began this work, it was necessary to tackle the specific features of *Red Dead Redemption II*, in order to build a solid theoretical frame. Consequently, we examined several important notions in order to pave the way for our research.

Once this first theoretical frame was established, we then moved on to the notions of ideology and discourse. We began by examining the concept of ideology itself by giving an appropriate definition and how ideology could be linked to video games. We then studied the procedural rhetoric of Ian Bogost, which was really central in our study because it is directly linked to games and shows how the processes of the game can be used to convey a discourse. We saw that “interactivity” was also an important factor because it requires the player in order to progress in the game. This is a factor that distinguishes it from other media like cinema for example. Naturally, it was impossible for us not to tackle the notion of discourse and the different techniques put in place to convince an audience. We saw that “the presupposed” and “sous-entendu” were very meaningful in the development of a discourse. We then examined the different Ideological and Repressive States Apparatuses that are to be found in our everyday life.

These two first chapters were important because they were both used in the final chapter of this work. It was important to define and examine each aspect of the game so that it would be easier to understand how it manages to reflect a discourse about another era. The game being very long and featuring many interactions, we only based our research only on meaningful and key scenes that could highlight the game's ideology. That is why we purposely chose topics in which there was a lot to say. We saw that the game was able to reflect a discourse about another and to remediatize/deconstruct stereotypes with the help of the avatar, environment, components, PNJs, the cut-scenes etc. We see that games are a whole and that one aspect does not go without another one.

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