

“Face Me to the West”: Arthur Morgan as a Kaleidoscope for the ‘Western Hero’ in

Red Dead Redemption 2

I. Introduction

The Western as a genre needs little introduction to anyone even slightly familiar with the popular culture of the United States. From classic, genre-defining works such as James Fenimore Cooper’s series *The Leatherstocking Tales*, and legendary Western director John Ford’s film *The Searchers* (1956), to today’s more remote descendants like the Star Wars franchise or Star Trek, which have often been called space-Westerns, most people have encountered the Western in some form or another, be it in film, stories—or even video games. I myself was introduced to it as a child through the *Winnetou* books, a series written by German author Karl May, which became immensely popular, first in his home country, then later on during the 20th century, in Eastern Europe as well. Although the novels themselves are factually inaccurate—with many instances of incorrect geography, invented Native American customs and language, as well as misrepresented cultural details—and are better described as a fantasy series written in the spirit of the Frontier Myth, and informed largely by other Westerns and contemporary accounts, they still managed to capture the essence of the genre—although with more mind paid to the teachings of Christianity than their earlier American representative works of the genre. Thrilling tales of heroes with nigh superhuman strength and skill, who always manage to save the day and dish out just punishments to the villains, then hop onto their trusty horses and ride off into the sunset, towards their next adventure—it had everything to capture the mind of children.

Western as a genre emerged in the 19th century, just as the frontier itself began to fade—in his now famous work, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” Frederick Jackson Turner considers the year of 1890 to be the “closing of a great historic

movement” (1), with the disappearance of the frontier line, although a few stragglers remained from the age of the Wild West—and people’s fascinations with times gone by began building up the mythical version of the Old West. It is at this time that, as Matthew Carter writes in *Myth of the Western*, “‘frontier narratives’ flourished first in the dime novels and stage shows of the late nineteenth century” (1).

Of the aforementioned stage shows, one stood out as more notable for the formulation of the Western: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Rising to fame around the same time Frederick Jackson Turner began to call attention to the frontier’s importance in American history and culture—for example, both were present at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, though only Turner in any official capacity, symbolizing two and in some ways opposing perspectives of the Wild West—Buffalo Bill’s show was “for more than thirty years (1883—1916) one of the largest, most popular, and most successful businesses in the field of commercial entertainment” (Slotkin 67). The titular character of Buffalo Bill was played by William F. Cody, who was the creative mind behind the whole attraction and largely responsible for establishing its—and consequently shaping the Wild West’s—popular image: gunfights, wars against the ‘savages’, and the triumphs of settlers. Although the advertisement for the show and Cody himself put great emphasis on their aim to present the life and history of the frontier authentically, it is important to point out that “despite its battery of authentications, the Wild West wrote ‘history’ by conflating it with mythology” (Slotkin 70).

These shows, as well as Turner’s academic exploration of the frontier, were highly influential and an important basis for how the genre would evolve later in the 20th century. The true ‘golden age’ of Western came about with the rise of the motion picture—“The principal medium whereby frontier mythology was popularised in the twentieth century was, of course, the cinema” (Carter 1). Even in the era of silent and black-and-white films (such as *The Great Train Robbery* [1903] or *High Noon* [1952]) the Western proved successful in

captivating audiences and remained a constant staple of the industry as it evolved. It is here that the iconic landscape of the Wild West was born, thanks largely to the cinematography used by John Ford, who is arguably the most influential figure in Western cinema, making him culturally significant as well—“[John Ford’s] frontier narratives are not always faithful representations of history, but they are always culturally correct when one considers their historic and cinematic moments” (Matheson xviii). His work roughly coincided with the ‘classic’ era of the genre, which lasted from around the turn of the century up until the 1960s, when a cultural shift occurred from the modern to the post-modern. Westerns began to dismantle and subvert genre conventions, blurring the line between hero and villain, with European iterations such as Spaghetti Westerns becoming widely known and acclaimed (see the films of Sergio Leone or the *Trinity* series). This era is often dubbed the ‘revisionist’ or ‘post-’Western.

In this essay, I will argue that the multilayered portrayal afforded by the medium of video games allows for Arthur Morgan, the playable protagonist of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, to represent different versions of the Western hero that have appeared throughout the genre’s history, from classic to revisionist Western, and how these different, at times clashing depictions come together to form a cohesive whole.

II. The Western Hero

But what or who exactly is the ‘Western hero’? In her book, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Western* (1992), Jane Tompkins approaches the role—or at least the ‘classic’ version of it—as such: “To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving” (73). According to her, the genre is in large part motivated by the rejection of femininity and the feminine sphere, which dominated Victorian popular literature, in an attempt to ‘reclaim’ traditional

masculinity. With this firm stance taken in opposition to all things women represent come several dichotomies—though, as Tompkins herself notes: “What is most characteristic of these oppositions is that as soon as you put pressure on them they break down” (48).

The main dichotomies I wish to briefly discuss are: actions instead of words, materialism and violence instead of religion and peace, as well as a preference for nature instead of civilization. Most Western heroes hold a dislike for talkativeness, the moral principles of Christianity, such as forgiveness—almost always rejected through the revenge narratives that dominate the genre—the comforts of civilization and, seen as a representation of all above aspects, women. Even though these aspects do exist at the very fringes of the Western’s world—“The genre's revenge plot depends on an antithetical world of love and reconciliation” (Tompkins 41)—they are ultimately used to prop up the hero’s own code and way of life, usually by devaluing or ridiculing all that they stand for, affirming the hero’s right to turn his back on them.

An interesting aside is that, despite a continued rejection of religion and its sentiments, conflicts of good versus evil are prevalent in classic Westerns—a period which lasted up until the 1960s—with heavier shades of grey morality introduced only during the revisionist era of the genre. Outlaws and stereotypical negative characters, who before were simply either fodder or destined to play the villain, suddenly became protagonists in their own right, whose journeys began to stray from the well-established path laid out by their heroic predecessors.

Thus, the revisionist Western hero can broadly be characterized by the subversion of one of the classic Western hero’s traits. To bring a few examples, the titular Django from *Django Unchained* (2012) is not markedly different in personality or motivation—rescuing his love Hildi and taking revenge on those who have wronged him—from the classic Western hero, however his background as a freed slave, who, amongst other minorities, were often left

out or forced into the background as one-note caricatures in traditional Western narratives, makes him a decidedly revisionist Western hero. Another such protagonist is William Munny from *Unforgiven* (1992), a former outlaw and alcoholic gunslinger, who changed his ways and left the life of crime behind for the sake of the woman he loved. However, throughout the course of the film, after having taken on a bounty for the supposed one thousand dollars offered, he slowly slips back into his old ways, culminating in a climax, during which he viciously takes revenge for the death of his friend.

This grey morality and struggle with their own darker urges is a frequent angle from which the revisionist Western deconstructs the heroes of classic Western. Most protagonists of Sergio Leone, the Italian director famous for his *Dollars Trilogy* and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), fall into this category as well. For example, even Blondie, the titular ‘good’ in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) could only be called as such in comparison to his peers. In reality, all three are money-hungry fortune hunters, each with their own code of honor that are far removed from the moral values of a classic Western hero. Women, who had been often pushed to the side as background characters or mere love interests before, also began to take on a more active leading role in revisionist Westerns. Mattie Ross from *True Grit* (1969/2010) or Jill McBain from *Once Upon a Time in the West*—or even the vengeful prostitutes, who set in motion the plot of *Unforgiven*—while not the sole protagonists, are far more relevant to their respective movies than their predecessors.

III. Western in video games and the *Red Dead* series

During the early days of video games, the Western was quite prevalent in this new medium of entertainment. *The Oregon Trail* (1971), as stated by the Introduction of *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth, and Violence in the Video Game West*, could be considered the trailblazer for the genre, although its focus is the myth of the frontier and the Western

expansion, instead of the classic lone gunslingers and desolate settings one would be familiar with from Western cinema. Between the 1970s and the 2000s, a steady stream of Western-themed video games were produced—for example, *High Noon* (1984) for the Commodore 64, *Outlaws* (1997), *Gun* (2005), *Desperados* series, which is notable for the fact that its latest entry, *Desperados III*, was released in 2020 after a thirteen-year-long break—and evolved along with the rest of the medium.

However, by the time of the 2010s, as the genre lost a lot of steam, from its controversial portrayals and tropes concerning women and minorities—especially Native Americans—as well as farther removed incarnations, such as the space Western, becoming more and more popular, interest had dried up somewhat, with one notable exception: Rockstar Games' *Red Dead* franchise.

The first part of this now iconic series was *Red Dead Revolver*, released in 2004, and is arguably the black sheep of the family. Its premise is relatively simple, with its story and themes following closely after that of classic Westerns, complete with common tropes, such as a protagonist driven primarily by vengeance. In the narrative of the franchise's extended universe, the story of *Revolver* is often thought to be nothing more than a mere legend, a tale told around campfires and its hero, Red Harlow, only a figment of the West's imagination. Indeed, there is a notable shift in tone between *Revolver* and the next game, *Red Dead Redemption* (2010, henceforth *RDR*). Unlike its predecessor, *RDR* would better be classified as a revisionist Western or at least heavily inspired by it. The narrative follows former outlaw John Marston, as he is ripped away from his life as a rancher after his family is kidnapped and held hostage by agents of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, who force him to go after the remaining members of his former gang and right the wrongs committed in his past. The latest entry of the series, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), which is a prequel to *RDR*, is

in essence the exploration of the previously mentioned past, from the perspective of a new protagonist, Arthur Morgan.

“RDR 2 is a sprawling tale of the demise of the American Old West” (2)—this is how Reinhardt Fourie summarizes the plot of the game in “‘Narrative Enmeshment’ in Rockstar’s *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018)”. Indeed, the story of *Red Dead Redemption 2* begins in 1899, the sunset years of the Wild West. This point is hammered home immediately by the game’s opening: “By 1899, the age of outlaws and gunslingers was at an end. America was becoming the land of laws. Even the west had mostly been tamed. A few gangs still roamed but they were being hunted down and destroyed”. We follow the Van der Linde gang—made up of a diverse group of people, who, for various reasons, found themselves on the fringes or cast out of society. After a botched robbery results in a massacre, they are on the run from authorities, as well as the Pinkerton Detective Agency, trying to get ‘one last big score’ to leave the country and the perils of civilization behind. The player takes control of Arthur Morgan, a lifelong outlaw, the gang’s loyal enforcer, and right-hand man to the group’s charismatic leader, Dutch van der Linde. However, as they are forced to flee further and further to the east with each chapter of the story, going from one failed operation to the next, and as more and more of their members get killed in the process, a dissent starts to form among their ranks and the Van der Linde gang soon begins to fall apart.

Arthur Morgan, in a lot of ways, is a reflection of the group itself and his decline coincides with the gang’s deterioration as well. Towards the end of chapter five, Arthur is diagnosed with tuberculosis, which he had contracted while beating up a sick debtor to the gang, who did not have the money to pay them back. This revelation marks a crucial turning point in his character arc—both the ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ version of it—as, with his inevitable death looming near, the regrets about the life of crime and violence he had led come to the forefront of his thoughts. It is up to the player whether or not he acts on them: he

can either make an attempt to redeem himself or sink further into the depravity of an outlaw's life. Whichever route is chosen, Arthur always dies at the end of the game, passing the torch on to John Marston, who we play in the epilogue and the first game.

As a video game protagonist, Arthur Morgan is in a unique situation in regard to his characterization. The medium allows for not only player input to shape the story they experience—in some cases this can result in drastic changes in how the narrative unfolds (see the branching paths found in *Detroit: Become Human* [2018])—but also often necessitates that several different versions of the same character co-exist, which end up forming a multilayered portrayal singular to the medium of video games.

IV. Gameplay vs. Narrative

To begin with, let us first take a look at the two main spheres *RDR2* is divided into: gameplay and narrative. In her book *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*, Tracy Fullerton defines gameplay as made up of ‘formal elements’—“Players, objective, procedures, rules, resources, conflict, boundaries, and outcome: These are the essence of games” (60). To put it simply, it is the framework in which the player interacts and engages with the game, dominated by action-reaction between them and the developers. In the case of *RDR2*, whenever you decide to have Arthur shoot a gun, eat a bread roll, hop on his horse and ride away, or taunt an NPC (Non-playable character), it is gameplay.

Narrative, on the other hand, is made up of ‘dramatic elements,’ which “give context to gameplay, overlaying and integrating the formal elements of the system into a meaningful experience” (Fullerton 101). These include things that are found in most narrative structures, such as premise, character(s), story, worldbuilding, and dramatic arc, while others, like challenge and play, are more specifically tied to the narrative of games. Or, as Marco

Caracciolo puts it in his essay “Playing Home: Videogame Experiences between Narrative and Ludic Interests,” narrative in games “serves to reinforce the aesthetic illusion of a fictional world and give players’ actions a broad teleological orientation via ‘quests’ and ‘missions’” (233). He then goes on to point out that not all video games employ these devices in the same way, as some place more emphasis on either gameplay or narrative, or lean more towards experimental methods of storytelling instead of traditional structures (“‘videogames’ is an umbrella concept covering a large number of platforms and genres, and it seems unreasonable to expect the notion of narrative to be consistently relevant across this vast landscape” [Caracciolo 233]).

Video games in a lot of ways present unique opportunities for storytelling and the impact it can have on the audience. In his paper, Fourie argues that the medium is capable of creating “a state through which the player’s narrative engagement in the story is heightened to a point that is technically unachievable through other storytelling media such as prose and film” (2-3), an experience which he coined the titular “narrative enmeshment”.

It is important to note that these two spheres cannot be separated from one another completely, and, due to the nature of video games, often bleed together or overlap in certain places. But for the sake of simplicity, I have chosen to divide them. Thus, in the essay *narrative* will refer to the cutscenes, questlines, dialogues, and texts (such as Arthur’s journal and other documents) as well as ‘story events’ witnessed by the player around the Camp or happened upon throughout the open world, while *gameplay* will generally refer to the segments where the player is in control of Arthur. As said before, the line between the two is not always clear-cut and there are certainly places of overlap between the planes—as well as the effects the narrative progression has on the gameplay and vice versa. However, in order to showcase the different versions of Arthur present in each sphere, such broad a division will do.

V. Portrayal in the Narrative: Revisionist Western Hero

The narrative is where Arthur Morgan's foundation as a character is largely established, through his actions, decisions—often contributed to by the player—and additionally his thoughts, which are showcased mostly through the journal he keeps, as well as a few choice conversations towards the end of the game. As the story of *Red Dead Redemption 1* and *2* takes its inspiration more from revisionist Western cinema—while also paying plenty of homage to the classics—it is no surprise that in the narrative, Arthur largely takes on the traits of a post-Western hero. Rather than law-enforcing sheriffs or cowboys—who, while rough in manners, still fit neatly into the parameters of traditional hero—he is more of an anti-hero than anything, his grey morality physically represented in-game by a crucial mechanic referred to as the 'Honor System'—a system which assigns the majority of actions taken in-game either negative or positive honor and represents it on a scale. Through it, the player's choices during quests and the in-game world can have a direct influence on Arthur's path and characteristics, which is even expressed through changes in dialogue and certain cutscenes.

Although technically there exists a middle ground, known as neutral honor, by and large, there are two routes between which the honor system eventually makes players choose: High Honor and Low Honor. These not only influence the closure of Arthur's story, with two possible endings for each path, but also his character arc and through it, which subtype of the revisionist Western hero he embodies. These shifts in the characterization of Arthur will be detailed towards the end of the essay.

Characterization of protagonists in video games is, according to Fullerton, a careful balance between two essential aspects. One is 'agency', which is "the practical function of a character to serve as a representation of the player in the game" (Fullerton 114) and the other

is ‘empathy,’ “the potential for players to develop an emotional attachment to the character, to identify with their goals and, consequentially, the game objectives” (Fullerton 114). It is not only important that these two be balanced but it should also be done so in a way to suit the needs of the game. For example, an RPG (Role-playing game) such as *Baldur’s Gate 3* or *Elden Ring*, that lets the player create their character, requires a different balance than *Red Dead Redemption 2*, which has an established protagonist with a pre-existing personality.

In my opinion, Arthur Morgan’s representation in the narrative may classify him, in general, as a revisionist Western hero. If we recall the oppositions brought up earlier—actions vs. words, materialism vs. religion, violence vs. peace, nature vs. civilization—and apply them to Arthur, we can see that on the surface, they hold up fairly well. Besides being an outlaw, upon his first introduction, he does seem to embody the values and personality of classic Western heroes: his speech is often short, simple, and to the point, is not particularly religious, abhors civilization and prefers to spend his time in nature, and, through his life of crime, is bound to violence, even if he does not particularly revel in it. In a classic Western film, he would have likely played the role of a one-note villain, a mere minion to the ‘big bad’ that is Dutch van der Linde. Arthur has the persona of an outlaw, but it hides a more complex and partly repressed inner self, which is slowly revealed to the player as they accompany him throughout his journey.

Actions and words both play an important part in Arthur’s character arc, especially if the player chooses to lead him down a path of redemption. At the beginning of the game, his journal and drawings offer the most comprehensive look into his thoughts, revealing his—often self-deprecating—inner monologue and the doubts, which he is reluctant to voice throughout the game. As the game progresses and the gang’s situation becomes dire—not to mention his diagnosis—Arthur starts to open up more and more, revealing not only his insecurities and feelings but also deeply buried traumas, that otherwise go unsaid the rest of

the story. In one memorable scene towards the end of the game, Arthur almost off-handedly reveals that he had a son, who died tragically—and because of people who walk the same path as his own father.

ARTHUR. I had a son once. Years ago. I don't talk about him much.

RAINS FALL. What was his name?

ARTHUR. Isaac. (...) He was such a good kid...

RAINS FALL. What happened?

ARTHUR. I got there one day and... saw two crosses outside and I knew right away. Turned out some bastards had come through, robbed them, and shot them dead. All for ten dollars. It hardened me... feeling that kind of pain. But I know now that you don't get to live a bad life and have good things happen to you.

The most pivotal scene of Arthur's character arc does not happen during a duel or a shootout; it is merely him, sitting down and having a conversation with either Sister Calderón or Reverend Swanson—both being figures of the clergy, who rarely play a serious role in classic Westerns—after his illness overwhelms him. His talk with the Sister is especially impactful, as it has him opening up and allowing himself a vulnerability we have rarely seen from Arthur before this, and finally expressing the fear he feels from his impending death, as well as the kind of man he will die as.

ARTHUR. I'm dying, Sister. (...) I got TB. I got it beating a man to death, for a few bucks. I've lived a bad life, Sister.

CALDERÓN. We've all lived bad lives, Mr. Morgan, we all sin. [...]

ARTHUR. I had a son... he passed away. I had a girl who loved me, I threw that away. My momma died when I was a kid, and my daddy...well, I watched him die, and it weren't soon enough. (...) I guess I... I'm afraid.

CALDERÓN. There is nothing to be afraid of, Mr. Morgan. Take a gamble that love exists and do a loving act.

Arthur Morgan is fundamentally a good man committing bad deeds, mostly because that is the only example he saw growing up. Ostracized from civilization, he in turn detests it, and endeavors to find solace in nature, which is perhaps the only trait of the classic Western hero that is not wholly subverted—although, it is not necessarily the hard, rocky landscapes that he appreciates the most, with his drawings rather capturing the wildlife and flora he and the player find as they travel across the open world. There is an interesting comparison to be made between Arthur Morgan and a side character named Albert Mason, a wildlife photographer who is heavily implied to be a sort of mirror image of Arthur, should he have been brought up in a healthy family, and is consequently a kind, if somewhat bumbling man, with a great love for nature.

As for violence, though he commits plenty of it, Arthur is clearly weary of the life he had led, and no longer takes much pleasure in it, each new deed he does only adding to the guilt he bears. He can also recognize the destructive cycle it brings about, as he himself states that “revenge is a fool’s game,” directly rejecting the core of many Western narratives.

Ultimately, Arthur is presented as a flawed, but very human character, one who, based upon the player’s choices, may find some redemption in death and in his efforts to heal the cycle of violence, vengeance, and cruelty he fell victim to, by helping John Marston and his family escape the pursuing Pinkertons at the end of the game; or fail to better himself and give in to his worst self at last, becoming no better than the villain of the game, Micah Bell: a selfish, rotten man. Both these ends echo the fates of several revisionist Western protagonists.

VI. Portrayal in the Gameplay: Classic Western Hero/Gunslinger

On the other hand, the gameplay of *Red Dead Redemption 2* gives us a different perspective on Arthur, a portrayal which at times stands in opposition to points the narrative aims to get across.

Action is a key element here. As opposed to narrative, where the cutscenes and scripted events restrain player control to a select few choices, gameplay—especially in the case of open world games (“a video game or part of a video game in which the player is not constrained to achieving specific goals and has a large degree of freedom to explore, interact with, or modify the game environment” [Merriam-Webster])—imposes far less restrictions on what the player can do, even if there are always boundaries set, which cannot be crossed without fundamentally breaking the game and consequently, the illusion it aims to create.

Power fantasy—a term most often used to refer to the trope, in which through the main character, a reader or player may experience an escapist fantasy of ‘being the strongest’ and can go hand-in-hand with revenge fantasies (Habel)—is an aspect present in many of the more action-oriented video games, and *RDR2* is no exception. A skilled enough player can make Arthur do just about anything within the limitations of the in-game world, including such inhuman feats as massacring a town’s worth of enemies all on his own. To live out this ‘outlaw’ fantasy, the players are provided with a wide array of tools, such as healing items (food, tonics, and drinks) that are able to patch up gunshot wounds in mere seconds, a prominent gameplay feature called ‘Dead Eye’, which allows Arthur to slow down time and increase the accuracy of his aim to a level that would be unthinkable in a real-life situation.

Due to this, during gameplay, Arthur ends up sharing far more resemblance to the mythical gunslingers and heroes found in classic Western cinema, a character archetype which revisionist Westerns often try and deconstruct—take for example the climax of *Unforgiven* or “The Noblest of Men, and a Woman”, a side-quest found in *RDR2*, the whole point of which is to showcase the unglamorous truth behind the legendary gunslingers, that a

wider culture unfamiliar with the realities of the Wild West venerates. Even as the storyline revolves around Arthur's morality, mortality, and complexities as a thoroughly humanized character, the version of him existing inside the realm of gameplay ironically embodies the trope of the superhuman gunslinger. Here, the outlaw persona he wears inside the narrative becomes fully realized.

Before moving on to a more thorough exploration of the Honor system and the different character trajectories that it results in, I would like to take a short detour and examine the points of overlap between narrative and gameplay. There are certain instances where the narrative 'invades' the gameplay, such as after the revelation of Arthur's illness, his weight decreases, and the health items he consumes no longer provide all their benefits. Another example occurs at Lenny's—one of the gang members—death, where the player is prevented from shooting the men who, a split second later, end up killing him. In the context of gameplay, saving Lenny would have been possible with the precise utilization of Dead Eye. However, as his death is a fairly important plot point in the story, the more realistic characterization of Arthur takes over, his superhuman persona disappearing in favor of the more fallible and realistic depiction.

VII. Damnation vs. Redemption

As mentioned before, the narrative—through the implementation of the Honor System—offers up two different paths and, based upon player choices, four different endings to Arthur's story. It is in many ways emblematic of the two differing fates the typical hero of revisionist Western may face.

Near the tail end of *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s main story, as the Pinkertons close in on the scattered remains of the Van der Linde gang, Arthur—and subsequently the player—has an important choice to make: either help John Marston safely escape their pursuers and

reunite with his family, or risk returning to the gang's campsite and retrieve the large sum of money still hidden there from their earlier exploits. This happens regardless of whether the player has high or low honor, although how each ending plays out is affected by the honor system. Arthur also always gives John his satchel—which contains his journal, the physical manifestation of his innermost self—as well as his hat, passing on his legacy together with the key pieces of his identity, all in the hope that John can become a better man, and finally escape the cycle of violence they spent their lives trapped in.

Though the endings all have distinct tones and significance, they follow a similar pattern of events. Arguably the 'worst' out of the four is the one in which a low honor route Arthur leaves John to go back for the money. Here, he is ambushed by Micah before he can leave with the spoils and the two end up getting into a knife fight. After struggling with one another—a very visceral fight compared to a lot of others in the game—Micah stabs Arthur. Before he can kill him, Dutch shows up, at which point Arthur informs him that Micah is the one who ratted out the gang to the Pinkertons, not the previously suspected Molly O'Shea ("[You] Let him damn us all, Dutch."), shattering Dutch's so far unwavering faith in the latter. After Dutch leaves, Arthur tries to crawl away, but Micah stabs him in the back, killing him.

The high honor version, while largely the same, has a few key differences: in this ending, Arthur manages to blind Micah in one eye and also manages to prevent himself from being stabbed by biting his hand. His dialogue also changes (To Dutch: "You're dead. Inside, you're dead."). Micah leaves with the money instead of killing Arthur, who then dies facing the rising sun.

Notably, none of the endings have been confirmed as the 'canonical choice,' and likely deliberately so. However, many who have played the game—including the voice actor of Arthur Morgan, Roger Clark ("The REAL Arthur Morgan" 3:37-4:06)—consider the

ending where a high honor Arthur helps John to be the ‘best’. It is easy to see why, as this is the conclusion, which completes Arthur’s character arc in the most satisfying and thematically relevant way.

Here, Arthur stays with John, helping him fight off Pinkerton agents, all to escape and reunite with his family—sacrificing himself for him. Once his illness gets the better of him, Arthur urges John to go ahead, while he buys him what time he can. Like in the other endings, the sequence of events is similar: Micah ambushes Arthur, the two fight, with the former ultimately coming out on top. Not wanting to give up and let Micah get away, Arthur crawls towards a discarded gun, but just as he reaches it, Dutch appears and stops him. Upon revealing Micah as the ‘rat’, Dutch escapes alone, parting ways with Micah, both leaving a dying Arthur alone, who, after dragging himself up the cliffside, dies facing the sunrise. The low honor route, again, plays out similarly, except Micah does not leave, but shoots Arthur in the head.

MICAH. You’re not better than me, Morgan.

ARTHUR. Whatever you say, you fool.

MICAH. Damn you.

ARTHUR. Damn us both!

Death is always Arthur’s fate—it is inevitable and rather fitting for a character who embodies the genre’s heroes (“To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die. Death is everywhere in this genre” [Tompkins 24]). However, the manner in which it is delivered between the high honor and low honor routes is significant. In the low honor endings, Micah—who is arguably the main villain of the game, and here becomes a mirror to the protagonist’s own wretchedness—kills Arthur, either shooting or stabbing him, ripping his remaining moments away from him brutally. “Arthur’s death by way of murder means one is denied narrative catharsis and closure” (Fourie 8), but this is a fitting end to the version of the

character we see here. After all, he meets the fate most other Western villains do, a final act of justice for all the wrongs he had committed, even if there is irony in the fact that it is delivered by a man who is just as bad if not worse than Arthur himself. The only reason we as players would see this end as a tragedy instead of satisfying retribution is the change of perspective. We, who have been with Arthur throughout his entire journey, know the other side to him, someone kinder and reflective and filled with guilt for his actions, but unable to break the cycle of violence and vengeance. And so, what we see is not justice, but Micah, through the act of murder, condemning Arthur to die as the ruthless, bloodthirsty outlaw he believed himself to be.

During the high honor endings, on the other hand, Arthur gets to die on his own terms in a sense, always with his face turned towards the sunrise as he breathes his last breath. This motif harkens back to a line of dialogue spoken by him during an interaction at camp early on in the game, where Arthur is asked how he wishes to be buried, once he dies: “Face me to the west so I can watch the setting sun and remember all the fine times we had that way”. This dialogue is in line with his nostalgia for the ‘old days’ of the Wild West and the Van der Linde gang but also his own belief that he cannot change or redeem himself, the weight of the crimes he had committed too heavy—so he might as well die the way he had lived.

But in the endings, in which Arthur has chosen the path of redemption, attempting to change for the better, even if he himself does not fully believe in it being possible, he spends his last moments facing the east, watching a new dawn break over the sky. A hope for change, and a better life for those who got out—the Marston family.

Each route also has a wild animal attached to it as a symbol, seen through visions and dreams as Arthur inches closer and closer to his death. High honor represented by a buck framed by a peaceful and sunlit environment, and low honor by a dark-furred coyote, behind

it a dark, bleak, and stormy scenery. These, of course, mirror the path Arthur treads, and the possible fate he may face at the end of it.

Even though the high honor route is often preferred by the players of *Red Dead Redemption 2*—based on frequent comments and posts online—as mentioned above, there is no one true ending to Arthur Morgan’s story. From the first moments of the story, we are shown that he can be compassionate and caring—the rescue of Sadie Adler from the O’Driscoll gang—but is also capable of being utterly ruthless and violent, which he himself reflects upon, as he tries to comfort a scared and traumatized Sadie: “We’re bad men, but we ain’t them.”

As the title of the game itself suggests, one of the central themes of *RDR2* is redemption, of which several questions are asked by the narrative: Does such a thing exist at all? And if so, can people like Arthur Morgan, who have murdered, robbed, pillaged, and caused harm to many innocent people throughout their lives, earn it? Arthur himself struggles with this dilemma throughout the game—especially after his diagnosis, as he learns of his impending death—and the players themselves have to ultimately contend with this question. They can either continue roleplaying as a hardened outlaw—the path which often results in the most fun and exhilarating gameplay sequences—or commit to changing their own ways as well, even if it requires them to give away valuable resources such as money or food, only receiving gratitude in exchange for their donations.

Most often, the interplay of narrative and gameplay, with the help of the honor system, forces players into a see-saw game of good and bad decisions, consequently mirroring the moral struggles found in many examples of the revisionist hero archetype Arthur represents in the story (see for example William Munny or the protagonists of *The Wild Bunch*). ‘Damnation vs. Redemption’ is a conflict central to his arc, however, unlike in

other, more traditional narratives, it is left up to the player to decide, which is the more fitting end to the character they mold him to be.

VIII. Conclusion

The game *Red Dead Redemption 2* allows for several differing and clashing depictions of its main character, Arthur Morgan to co-exist inside the game. One version of him embodies the values of a classic Western hero, while the other is characterized more as a revisionist Western hero. In the narrative, he is painfully human, struggling not only with his own guilt and regrets but also accepting his impending death, showing moments of true kindness but also ruthlessness, whereas, in the gameplay, he is nigh superhuman, an avatar for the player to live out the power fantasy of an unbelievably skilled outlaw, who can shoot his way out of any conflict. And, through the two different paths he can take, there exists a version of Arthur who chooses to change and comes close to redemption—or possibly achieves it, depending on how you view his ending—and one, whose choices had condemned him to become the very monster he feared himself to be. As mentioned previously, video games as a medium are unique in the fact that they even allow for such a multilayered depiction, not to mention the fact that they offer a level of immersion—or ‘narrative enmeshment’—that cannot be found in any other media.

Red Dead Redemption 2 (and admittedly the entire *Red Dead* series) is not just a product of the Western genre but also an homage to it, from sprawling landscapes and cinematography reminiscent of the films of John Ford and other classic Westerns, a soundtrack which has hints of Ennio Morricone’s work, to a myriad of small easter eggs that reference both the genre-defining works that came before it, as well as events from the real-life frontier. The game at times feels like an attempt to capture and display the essence of Westerns—one that is done so rather successfully.

And so, it feels fitting—and perhaps intentional—that Arthur Morgan can be seen as a multifaceted representation of the ‘Western hero’ and its different manifestations.

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