**Saving Arthur Morgan: Red Dead Redemption 2 as a site of bereavement and grief-work**

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**Introduction**

The relationship between death and digital games is strangely paradoxical. While death is considered to be a ubiquitous and pervasive feature of videogames (Cuerdo & Melcer, 2020; Nicolucci, 2019: 189), it rarely carries the same finality that exists outside of the *‘magic circle’*: the metaphorical space in which the game takes place and within which the rules of the game apply (see: Consalvo, 2007: 7; Juul, 2008: 56). Instead, players are suspended in an endless loop of dying and respawning, making death more of an inconvenience (Copcic et al., 2013) or didactic tool to hone their skills (Schott, 2017; Wenz, 2019: 313), rather than a permanent state.

However, several games and genres have subverted the status-quo surrounding death in games. *Roguelikes*,a genre of videogames that strongly revolves around replayability and procedurally building the player character’s strength, rely heavily on the use of *perma-death*: the permanent loss and deletion of the player character and save-file (Bycer, 2021). Here, death becomes an integral part of the gameplay loop (see *Returnal* by Housemarque for a recent example). What’s more, *Roguelikes* are designed in such a way that they enforce the permanence of a player’s actions and decisions, by removing the possibility for players to manually save their progress and game. This is an interesting break from games that sometimes put impactful and emotional decisions to players, but they risk being undercut by players tactically scouting the effects of different decisions by saving and reloading their game progress.

In other cases, games such as *That Dragon, Cancer* and *A Mortician’s Tale* have started a more philosophical discussion on death within the boundaries of a medium in which it had become trivialized as a mechanic. Specifically, *That Dragon, Cancer* chronicles the personal story and emotional journey of the game developers in coping with the diagnosis and loss of their child (Schott, 2017; O’Hern et al., 2020). *A Mortician’s Tale*, on the other hand, challenges the usual depictions of death in video games by presenting a narrative that largely takes place within the crematorium of a small funeral home. The game tackles grief, loss, and death as players engage with the requests of grieving families through emails and carry out day to day tasks in the crematorium (Nicolucci, 2019; Kannen & Langille, 2020). While authors have discussed the various meanings (or meaninglessness) of death in videogames, there is still work to be done in exploring and understanding how players experience and engage with death and loss in videogames (Copcic et al., 2013; Cuerdo & Melcer, 2020).

To do this, I will first discuss and draw upon the model of Alexander Galloway (2006), which posits that games can be considered as both object and process: they have to be played to ‘exist’. As a result, videogames involve a constant back and forth between players and machine. This back and forth can present itself in a struggle for control whereby the machine will attempt to enforce the rules of the game’s code through perma-death, whereas in other cases players can attempt to control the narrative by tactically saving and reloading, or ‘rereading’ the game (Tan & Mitchell, 2019). This allows players to examine the outcome of their decisions and “see the way that those choices changed the course of the story, or see the same story from a different perspective” (Mitchell and Kway, 2020: 164).

This paper will subsequently explore the occurrence of death within videogames, and focus its exploration on the videogame *Red Dead Redemption 2* (henceforth *Red Dead 2*). Firstly, I will provide a brief overview of the ways in which videogames enforce and enact death through the computer or what Galloway terms ‘the machine’ in the form of ‘machine acts’ (cfr. Galloway, 2006). Secondly, drawing upon the same model, I will provide a brief overview of the ways in which players can employ what Galloway (2006) terms ‘operator acts’ to resist death in videogames. Thirdly, this discussion will be applied to *Red Dead 2*, where the article will discuss how the game chronicles the final moments of its protagonist Arthur Morgan, how it explores grief and loss through the game’s epilogue. In this paper I both talk about *being* Arthur in the game, as well as being *with* Arthur. This captures the duality of the player’s relationship with Arthur Morgan, both as an avatar, and as a character that they have come to intimately know throughout the game, but which eventually dies. Lastly, building on the argument that videogames are an arena where machines and players vie for control, I will show how players adopt emergent gameplay practices to resist the death of Arthur Morgan and create new narratives.

**Enforcing and resisting death in videogames**

***Videogames as actions – Galloway’s model of gamic action***

Before delving into the discussion of death in video games and the case of *Red Dead 2*, it is useful to delineate a definition of videogames, and to consider how they differ from other media, and to provide an overview of Galloway’s model of videogame as consisting of four possible moments of *gamic action,* which will be described below. Most importantly, videogames differ from other media in that they are considered to be both object and process. Rather than a book or film, a videogame does not arrive in the player’s hands fully formed. It appears as software or code that has to be played in order to materialize. As a result, playing a videogame requires the joint effort of both a machine – the computer, console, or device that is chosen to run the software – and a player (Galloway, 2006: 1-2), and the interactions between both will generate the “emergent narrative” of the player’s experience (Cardoso and Carvalhais, 2013: 25).

In other words, the game’s software or code can be thought of as the script of a film. It provides an outline of the general direction of the narrative and lays out the rules within which gameplay will occur. However, while a film will be recorded and consumed at very different locations and times, the game is performed by the player and the machine simultaneously. As a result, both the machine and the player feature as relevant actors during gameplay (Galloway, 2006: 5), and the distinction between machine and operator (or player) acts functions as the first axis of Galloway’s (2006) model of gamic action (see figure 1). While gameplay creates ‘a separate semi-autonomous space’ (Galloway, 2006: 6), within which play takes place sometimes termed the ‘magic circle’, gameplay is not restricted to actions that take place within this virtual space alone. Galloway thus adds the distinction between actions that take place in the diegetic space of the game, which consists of the narrative game world, and non-diegetic actions, which – while still part of the videogame in some way – exist outside of the narrative world of the game. As Galloway (2006: 8) goes on to explain, ‘in *‘Berzerk’*, pressing Start is a nondiegetic act, whereas shooting robots is a diegetic acts’.

*diegetic machine acts*

*diegetic operator acts*

*nondiegetic machine acts*

*nondiegetic operator acts*

*Figure 1: Overview of machine and operator acts based on Galloway (2006)*

Galloway’s model outlines 4 distinct types of gamic action, which are carried out by either the machine or operator, and performed within either diegetic or nondiegetic environments. Galloway refers to *diegetic machine acts* as moments where the player is not actively engaging with the game, such as an in-game cinematic scene, or the ambient movements of non-player characters or the environment (Galloway, 2006: 9-10). *Diegetic operator acts,* in turn, similarly ‘take place within the world of gameplay’ (Galloway, 2006: 22), but are carried out by the operator or player. moving the player character, jumping, or shooting, can all be considered diegetic operator acts. Thirdly, acts of configuration, such as adjusting the in-game menu, can be considered *nondiegetic operator acts*, as they consist of actions performed by players that exist outside of the imaginary world of the game. Lastly, Galloway distinguishes *nondiegetic machine* acts. These types of gamic action often consist of elements outside of the game’s narrative world, like a *HUD* or *‘head-up display’* which can communicate objectives, display a mini-map, or displays a player’s health or amount of bullets.However, inadvertent events such as glitches, computer crashes, or network lag (Galloway, 2006: 28). In the sections below, this article will apply this model to the discussion of death in videogames, and highlight how both machine and player perform actions that either enforce or resist death in video games.

**Death and the machine**

Following Sabine Harrer, *Videogames are the medium of loss and death* (2018: 9), it’s hard to talk about, or imagine, videogames without thinking of cult tokens of gaming such as ‘1 up’ power-ups, which grant the player an extra life, ‘hit’ or ‘health points’, which visualize the remaining amount of health a character has before dying, or the dreaded ‘game over’ screen. These tokens all serve as constant reminders of the mortality of the player’s character. Despite being a ubiquitous part of videogames (Nicolucci, 2019; Cuerdo & Melcer, 2020), the relationship between videogames and death is nothing short of complicated. When we look at the way death can occur for player-controlled characters in video games, we generally find two different ways in which player death is featured: either as a non-diegetic machine act, which exists outside of the game’s narrative world, or a diegetic machine act which is inherently entangled with the narrative thread that the game weaves (Galloway, 2006: 31).

**Death as a non-diegetic machine act** is perhaps the most prevalent and recognized of the two. Following Galloway’s (2006) model of diegetic and non-diegetic machine and operator (or player) acts, the most recognizable example of this first instance of death is the ‘game over’ screen. When death occurs as a non-diegetic machine act, gameplay is often interrupted in order to solicit an action from the player. This can range from inserting another coin to continue (in the case of arcade games) to reloading or ‘respawning’ their character in the game world. Here, the player’s death is mostly considered to be unrelated to or disregarded in the narrative of the game. This is perhaps made most explicit in the *Assassin’s Creed* series, where the player’s death is met with the message ‘desynchronized’, clearly signaling that the player’s death doesn’t sync up with the threads of fate that the developers have woven for the character. The only way that the player can progress in the story is by surviving or overcoming the obstacles that caused their previous demise.

This changes when we look at instances of **death as a diegetic machine act**. Here, the death of the player character doesn’t necessarily interrupt the narrative flow of the game, although it does induce some form of player passivity. As discussed above, common examples of this are cinematics in videogames, where the machine or computer takes over the wheel and forces players to take a backseat in order to watch events in the story unfold. As put by Galloway, these actions ‘transpire within the imaginary world of the game and are actions and are instigated by the machine’ (Galloway, 2006: 12). It is the fate of the character, written by the developer, enforced by the machine. Just as Aeris, one of the controllable characters in *Final Fantasy VII*, is destined to die at the end of the game’s first disc, so too is Arthur Morgan’s fate sealed in the code of *Red Dead 2*. As a result, death as a diegetic machine act is ingrained within the code and narrative of the game, and seemingly inescapable.

Although death might be preceded by player actions (or errors), for instance in the case of a miscalculated jump in a platformer, or an enemy attack that the player failed to block or dodge, it constitutes an act that is performed by the machine. This highlights how videogames as a medium require two actors – the machine and the operator or player – in order to take place, but also gives an indication of how both of these actors can negotiate and struggle for control over the narrative and events that transpire within the game.

**Death and the player**

As videogames are ‘both object and process’ (Galloway, 2006: 3), they are not fully formed until they go through the process of being ‘played’ using a computer or console. Because they rely on the interaction between player and machine, the experience of playing a video game can change significantly depending on the player or machine involved. In that sense, it is similar to Espen Aarseth’s discussion of ‘hypertext’. A text which is organized “so that it could be read in a sequence chosen by the reader” (Aarseth, 1997: 77). However, this freedom will always be limited ‘by the constraints laid down by the author’ (Aarseth, 1997: 78), in this case the developers (Denham and Spokes, 2021). While playthroughs of a game can be highly different from one another – especially in open world games – their differences will always be limited by pre-determined pathways (cfr. Aarseth, 1997: 78) between different sections of the game, be it parts of the game world, or narrative chapters. In the case of *Red Dead 2*, while players can freely explore the game world to some extent at any time, every subsequent chapter and act persistently impacts the world and characters in significant ways which cannot be reversed.

The emphasis on videogames as both object and process also makes Galloway’s conceptualization of video games slightly distinct from similar theories which consider games as an interaction between the developers and players (Steinkuehler, 2006; Robison, 2008; Consalvo, 2009). By emancipating the machine as an equally important actor which enforces the laws and rules written into the game’s software by the developer, Galloway’s model acknowledges the potential for gameplay to deviate from the original intentions of the developer. The occurrence of emergent gameplay or gameplay practices beyond the developer’s intentions (Steinkuehler, 2006), can thus be seen to derive from the lack of direct involvement of developers in the enactment of video games. They are the result of an interaction between machines and players, rather than players and developers. As a result, even when the machine tries to enforce the rules set out by the developers through diegetic and nondiegetic machine acts, players are not entirely powerless and can, in some cases, effectively cheat death.

As definitions of games are commonly based on their reliance on a set of rules to structure play, a fair bit of attention has been paid to the occurrence of ‘cheating’ in gaming. With regards to videogames, authors define cheating as the ‘breaking of rules established within the game or by the game community or as an expected activity given the conventions of game play’ (Hamlen & Blumberg, 2015: 85). Cheat acts are often ‘executed from outside the world of the game by the operator’ (Galloway, 2006: 13) by entering ‘cheat codes’ or using external hardware (Consalvo, 2007; Harrer, 2018), making them **non-diegetic operator acts**. Through cheats, players can bend the rules of the game that the machine strives to enforce, allowing them to circumvent or eliminate death entirely by replenishing the character’s health (Consalvo, 2007) or gaining extra lives (Cardoso and Carvalhais, 2013). This allows players to behave more creatively within the game world (Hamlen & Blumberg, 2015), and can kickstart ‘emergent’ gameplay and narratives that were unintended or unforeseen by the developers (cfr. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2020). However, it is suggested that attempting to rewrite the code of the game enforced by the machine can come with its own share of issues in the form of glitches and game crashes (i.e. non-diegetic machine acts) (Cardoso and Carvalhais, 2013), and thus requires some measure of compromise (Harrer, 2018).

**Diegetic operator acts** by contrast consist of more inconspicuous ways in which players can bend the rules of the game. By exploiting certain glitches (i.e. a malfunction or error of the machine cfr. Švelch, 2015) or mechanics within the game, players have managed to cheat death without incurring the potential compromise that Harrer relates to cheat acts. Exploits often skim the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate gameplay (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017), by not actively changing the code of the game but exploiting it in ways unforeseen by the developers (Consalvo, 2007: 114). In *World of Warcraft*, for instance, players could access a hidden area of the game by jumping (a diegetic operator act) up walls and mountains that were not intended to be traversed. More significantly to the emergence of personal narratives, players of *Final Fantasy IV* could create a glitch in the game that allowed them to skip a significant section in the game’s storyline (Cardoso & Carvalhais, 2013). This again highlights how exploits (and cheating) might open pathways for player creativity, and allow them to formulate their own personal narratives in the game. In the following sections, we will apply these models to the case of *Red Dead 2*, and explore how users apply similar diegetic and nondiegetic acts to resist the game’s main storyline and death of its main character.

**Exploring death within Red Dead 2**

*The end of an era: Red Dead 2’s setting and narrative*

*‘By 1899, the age of outlaws and gunslingers was at an end. America was becoming a land of laws…’ (Red Dead Redemption 2, Rockstar Games, 2018)*

*Red Dead 2* follows the Van der Linde gang as they face the end of the Wild West. The overall atmosphere of the game’s narrative exudes the feeling of an era coming to its end. The outlaws that held the country in its grip are in decline and being hunted down by the private detectives of the Pinkerton agency. Meanwhile, Dutch Van der Linde, the gang’s leader, is looking to make one last big hit before retiring the gang and letting them live out their lives with the money they earned in their previous exploits.

In the game, players take on the role of Arthur Morgan, a veteran of the Van der Linde gang who had been inducted into the group by Dutch Van der Linde at the age of 14. At the beginning of the game, players are immediately thrusted into the gang’s nomadic existence, as they traverse the mountains of Ambarino, after a failed heist caused them to flee the state. Throughout the rest of the game, this theme remains present, as the gang is constantly forced to reestablish its location with rival gangs and law enforcement on their heels. With every new location the gang finds themselves in, a piece of their old life is left behind. Gang members start falling like flies, as Dutch Van der Linde grows more desperate and reckless in his attempts to collect his final paycheck. With their deaths, the social cohesion of the gang itself begins to crumble.

As players follow Arthur Morgan throughout *Red Dead 2*’s narrative, they get to piece together Arthur’s history, and get to peek behind the outlaw’s burly façade. As the gang crumbles around him, players experience the doubts that start to grow in Arthur’s mind concerning Dutch Van der Linde’s leadership. While Dutch escalates his attempts at scoring big, Arthur increasingly exhibits emotional turmoil for his past actions and the legacy he’ll leave behind. He considers the decisions he’s made up until that point and contemplates leaving the Van der Linde Gang behind to reunite with a past love.

Returning to the discussion of how player and machine struggle for control within the arena of gameplay, the narrative thread that developers weave is enforced by machine acts through story missions, dialogue, and cinematics. While open-world games such as *Red Dead 2* offer considerable freedom to players to explore the game world at their own pace, certain mechanics within the game, the hypertextual links described by Aarseth (1997), will attempt to steer players back to chronological story beats which move the narrative forward. During the game’s second chapter, Arthur is sent to collect an unpaid debt by the gang’s bookkeeper. When Arthur arrives at the man’s farm, he learns that the debtor has no money to repay the Van der Linde Gang. This leads to Arthur threatening and physically assaulting the man who, unbeknownst to Arthur, had contracted tuberculosis. During the struggle, the man’s blood gets into Arthur’s eye, which will later cause Arthur to fall ill with tuberculosis himself. As this mission is a required story beat to progress to the next chapter of the game’s narrative, regardless of what choices players make, the bookkeeper will always send Arthur to the debtor’s farm to collect the debt, and Arthur is always fated to contract tuberculosis.

These events also play a major part in the narrative that *Red Dead 2* builds around its central character. With each subsequent chapter in the game, Arthur’s adopted family crumbles around him. His health also visibly and audibly deteriorates. Arthur’s complexion becomes increasingly pale, and he increasingly experiences coughing fits. Both of these examples function as diegetic machine acts, which again work to enforce the developers will within the game world, and render players increasingly aware of Arthur’s worsening condition. Although players might experience various non-diegetic deaths within the game world, which prompt them to reload their most recent save file, or a previous checkpoint, the audiovisual reflections of Arthur’s deteriorating health serve as a constant reminder of the character’s mortality, and offer a salient counterpoint to the perceived immortality that non-diegetic death acts offer players (cfr. Copcic et al., 2013; Wenz, 2019).

*Experiencing loss and grief-work through Red Dead 2*

*‘I’m dying, Sister. Yeah, I got TB. I got it beating a man to death for a few bucks.’ (Arthur Morgan in Red Dead Redemption 2, Rockstar Games, 2018)*

By the final chapters of the game’s storyline, Arthur Morgan is faced with the reckoning of his past actions. When players enter Saint Denis during one of the game’s story missions, Arthur Morgan has a coughing fit, at which point the machine wrestles control from the player and starts a cutscene. This interruption of the regular flow of play and removes the player’s control over Arthur Morgan, the game promptly shatters the player’s immersion and connection to Arthur Morgan, and in doing so, renders their connection to Arthur more fragile. In this sense, the sudden loss of control presents an important contrast to the involvement of players in the everyday interactions of Arthur Morgan within the game, and which potentially strengthen the player’s connection to the protagonist by inviting a higher sense of ‘self-presence’ where users feel as if they embody or are their virtual self (Jin and Park, 2009; Jin, 2011: 117). Rather than disrupting the fun of gameplay (Wills, 2018), the sudden loss of control – in tandem with the involvement of players in the everyday of Arthur’s life – elevates the mechanic of control to communicate the precarity of Arthur’s health and mortality against the backdrop of a medium that has socialized players to consider their player characters as immortal avatars. At this point in the game, Arthur is taken to a doctor’s office where he is diagnosed with tuberculosis, and confronted with the knowledge that time is running out. In a cutscene Arthur Morgan has a heart to heart with a nun, to whom he confesses his fear of dying:

*When he revealed he was dying to the nun at the train station […] it actually hit me. I was surprised when a lump got the back of my throat and I had to take a gulp. This game had the ability to actually move me and feel sad about a character who was going to pass away (Pete Hefferon, 2019).*

Rather than inviting the player to imagine Arthur’s future, through the multiple interactions with characters that reflect upon him leaving the van der Linde gang and building a different life, the game thus puts a different question to the player. Knowing that Arthurs fate is sealed, which legacy do you want to leave for him, and yourself? As the nun boards her train, she leaves Arthur with the advice to ‘take a gamble that love exists, and do a loving act.’ This feeds into the end of the game which sees Arthur set out on his final ride in order to provide John Marston the opportunity to make a better life for himself. In that sense *Red Dead 2* diverges significantly from the typical overarching narrative of *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) games, also developed by Rockstar Games. Whereas *GTA*’s narrative engenders meritocratic ideology whereby the player character starts from rock bottom and gradually accumulates notoriety and wealth (Paul, 2018), *Red Dead 2* appears to follow a similar structure yet eventually pulls the rug out from under the player’s feet. In some way, the character of Dutch Van der Linde, always pushing for yet another *bigger* score, feels like the incarnation of *GTA*’s ideology, whereas Arthur, confronted with his own mortality, becomes increasingly possessed by the thought of the world and legacy he will leave behind.

As players hurry back to the gang’s campsite near the end of the game, the song *‘That’s the way it is’* fills the player’s eardrums. Along the way to the campsite, players again intermittently lose control over Arthur as the game switches to a cinematic camera position and overlays the scene with quotes from characters who interacted with Arthur in the course of the game. The quotes, tied with the somber song playing in the background, makes Arthur’s Last Ride reminiscent of a eulogy. Breaking the tethers between Arthur and the player intermittedly by handing over the controls to the machine, the game appears to covertly use the loss of control as a way to prime the player for the moment where they would relinquish their grip on Arthur entirely. As players continue the last section of the game, and help John escape, a cutscene triggers. At this point, Arthur hands his hat, journal, and satchel to John, tokens of his role as the protagonist of the game, and a diegetic representation of Arthur passing the mantle of protagonist to John.

After Arthur’s death, the game progresses into an epilogue that follows John as he deals with the aftermath of Arthur’s death, and his exodus from the Van der Linde Gang. At this point, players continue a storyline that wraps up the game’s central narrative and sees John take revenge on the game’s main antagonist Micah Bell. However, after these story missions are played out, players can continue to explore the open world, and finish up side missions they had left uncompleted, albeit with one important caveat: they can no longer experience it as Arthur. *Red Dead 2* is heavily reliant on diegetic elements that established the game’s menu screens within the game world. For instance, when shopping for items players can pick items off the shelves or browse through shopping catalogues. Similarly, quests that Arthur completes within the game are represented by short blurbs in handwriting and sketches that appear in Arthur’s journal. This journal was made to look as an in-game object that players can leaf through as Arthur Morgan throughout the game, and is handed to John Marston just before Arthur’s death. As a result, when players complete side missions during the Epilogue of *Red Dead 2*, they do so in the form of John Marston who learns about these exploits from reading Arthur’s journal. During the epilogue, John Marston reveals the following to another character:

*‘He gave me his satchel. With some of his things in it. Remember that journal he always drew in? I got it… I’m a bit of a draftsman myself nowadays…’ (John Marston in Red Dead Redemption 2, Rockstar Games, 2018)*

The handover of the journal, among other tokens, is not only an important moment that cuts the tethers between Arthur Morgan and the player, but also shifts the narrative focus of the game from one that centered on the mortality of its protagonist to one of loss, grief, and restoration. Reacting to more rigid models of grief work, Stroebe and Schut (1999) suggest a dual process model of coping with bereavement that ‘suggests that people undertake, in varying proportions, […] loss- and restoration-oriented coping’(Stroebe and Schut, 1999: 212). This implies that there is not a linear path of different stages people traverse during bereavement, but rather, that people intermittently engage in both restoration- and loss-oriented activities (see figure 2) throughout their everyday lives (Stroebe and Schut, 1999). This is reflected in the game’s epilogue, where we see John Marston engage both in acts of coping with the loss of Arthur, as well as adjusting to his new life and engaging in ‘restoration-oriented acts’. Moreover, in line with Galloway’s (2006) argument that video games have to be ‘played’ in order to exist, the structure of *Red Dead 2’s* epilogue similarly forces players to act out John’s grief work. Just as John Marston is forced to deal with loss-oriented and restoration-oriented stressors following the game’s final chapter, players join John in coping with the loss of Arthur Morgan.



*Figure 2: A dual proves model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe and Schut, 1999: 213)*

The items that Arthur passes down to John, key among which is his journal, perhaps serve as the most important relics of the player’s memories of Arthur, which are reframed through the eyes of John as he adds to the journal or encounters people Arthur previously met. Aside from this however, the epilogue makes a point of highlighting how John intermittently engages in both loss- and restoration-oriented activities following the death of Arthur Morgan (see Stroebe and Schut, 1999). Fleeing after the events of the game’s concluding chapter (a loss-oriented activity), John takes up a new job as a farmhand (a restoration-oriented activity), but soon finds himself reconnecting with old gang members, and reminisce about Arthur in virtual representations of loss-oriented stressors (see Stroebe & Schut, 1999). At other times, players are presented with interactive cutscenes of John building a farm for his family, a striking counterpoint to the cinematics in the main game that featured a loss of control, or follow John on a date during which he formally proposes to his wife. Eventually, despite trying to make a new life for himself as a farmhand, John is set on a quest for revenge at the behest of his old gang members. However, these missions remain interspersed with restoration-oriented activities throughout the epilogue. In that sense, *Red Dead 2*’s epilogue seemingly emulates the duel process model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe and Schut, 1999), as players not only witness how John copes with his grief, but by embodying John, enact his grief work in the process of playing the game. With the passing of time and by playing through the epilogue, players find ways to cope with Arthur’s loss vicariously through John’s actions, and by playing as John, their agency becomes tethered to a new digital body. In time, as players keep exploring the world of *Red Dead 2* through John Marston, their time with Arthur Morgan will become a distant memory.

*Resisting the loss of Arthur Morgan through emergent gameplay and personal narratives*

Not all players have found solace in continuing the game as John Marston, and some have resisted the epilogue as a way to cope with Arthur’s death. Just as Harrer described the creative ways in which players resisted the death of Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII*, players have found ways of safeguarding their tethers and create their own alternative narratives. These consist mostly of non-diegetic player acts (see Galloway, 2006), including cheating, third-party modifications which can add content, characters, or change the rules of the game, and meta-gaming. The latter refers to ‘how a game interfaces outside of itself’ (Boluk and LeMieux, 2017: 14) or how players can potentially use outsider knowledge, or more concretely knowledge from previous playthroughs, when playing the game. Players on YouTube discovered a glitch in the game that players can exploit to continue exploring the world as Arthur Morgan after his death (Alcomohal, 2020; Arthur Morgan Gaming, 2020). Although this allows players to continue exploring the game as Arthur Morgan, using this exploit comes with a compromise (see Harrer, 2018: 84), and risks causing game crashes. Similarly, the PC version of the game has seen players develop third-party mods which allow players of the game to freely select the character they’d like to play as by editing their save-files at risk of destabilizing the game.

In other cases, players have avoided directly impacting the code of the game, and have used forms of meta-gaming in order to create an alternative timeline to further explore the game at their own pace, and avoid story missions that would progress the narrative and game world beyond a preferred point in time. Specifically, having learned of the fate of Arthur Morgan at the end of the game’s narrative, some players opted to restart or strategically ‘reread’ the game up until what they deem is the ideal point in Arthur’s time in the game. During chapter 2, Micah Bell, the antagonist of the game, is caught in jail, and Arthur has yet to contract tuberculosis by collecting debt from Thomas Downes:

*‘I’m in my third playthrough of the game, the second screwing around in Chapter 2, and now the third on my PS5. I absolutely am refusing to do the Leopold Strauss mission that leads you to Thomas Downes, and well… you know.’ (101dylmations, 2021)*

This connects to Mitchell and Kway’s discussion of rereading as a way for players to avoid or resist ‘closure’ in videogames, highlighted by players resisting the loss and death of Arthur Morgan by creating an alternative timeline where none of these events happen. Either indefinitely, or for a longer period of time. Still, even when meta-gaming it seems that the compromise that results from cheating or exploiting the game catches up to players through the burden of knowing what awaits Arthur in the game’s final chapter:

*‘It’s why I’ve put off finishing my 2nd playthrough for so long, I feel a constant sadness when playing as Arthur because I know what’s ahead of him.’ (Solarh, 2021)*

By restarting the game several times, players effectively create paratextual links between the different playthroughs. These meaningful links between playthroughs also shines through in the discussion of rereading, where rereading often still connects to the original reading of the text, and specifically aims to explore alternative narratives, perspectives, and events to the original reading. Similarly, paratextuality has discussed the idea of a hierarchy of texts, with one central text and other supporting texts. As Rodríguez-Ferrándiz notes, a paratext is “a place of passage (…), which invites us to learn more, but also provides what may eventually make us reject the reading of the actual text” (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2017: 167). In the case of cinema, the central text is considered to be the actual film, while examples of supporting texts can be found in trailers, movie posters, or interviews with the cast and crew. However, applying this framework to the rereading of *Red Dead 2* discussed above, we can tease out indications that the first playthrough of the game, where players complete the game’s narrative without prior knowledge, will always function in some way as the central text. This again strongly impacts the agency of players in creating their own personal narratives, and exhibits a different dimension of the constraints that players experience in their agency to freely navigate games or create their own personal narratives (see Denham and Spokes, 2021). Whereas players can set out to create alternative timelines where Arthur never contracts tuberculosis, these timelines will always exist in relation to the original playthrough, evidenced in the emotional weight that reddit user Solarh carries with them into subsequent playthroughs of the game. As a result, they cannot undo the idea scratching at the back of their minds that in the canonic timeline of the game, Arthur will always eventually pass away.

**Conclusion: Red Dead Redemption 2 as a site of bereavement**

This paper explored the representation of death in videogames by focusing on the game *Red Dead Redemption 2* by Rockstar Games, and how it emulates grief work and bereavement through the death of its protagonist and the subsequent epilogue. Throughout the course of the game players form a strong connection to Arthur Morgan, the game’s protagonist. However, this bond is suddenly fractured when Arthur Morgan dies in the concluding chapter of the game’s narrative. Subsequently, players are forced to continue the game by inhabiting the body of John Marston, who was provided a way out of the gang thanks to Arthur’s sacrifice. Players follow (and embody) John throughout the epilogue as he comes to terms with Arthur’s death and makes a new life for himself. Following the dual process model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe and Schut, 1999), players thus, alongside John, intermittently enact and engage in different loss- and restoration-oriented activities.

However, what this paper argued makes the case of *Red Dead 2* especially interesting, is the struggle that takes place between the player and the machine in resisting the permanence of Arthur’s death. This highlights how gameplay functions as an arena for a constant struggle between players and machines, the latter of which is the hardware that runs the game’s code and enforces the rules drafted by the game’s developers. This was explored by discussing two types of machine acts: diegetic machine acts, and non-diegetic machine acts. Indeed, players are not relegated to simply following the rules of the game, and use exploits, cheats, and meta-gaming to create their own narratives through diegetic and non-diegetic player (or operator) acts. Through mods and glitch play, players explored ways to continue playing as Arthur into the epilogue. In other cases, players strategically reread the game through a new playthrough where they specifically avoided playing the story missions that would determine Arthur’s eventual demise, in order to freely explore *Red Dead 2*’s open world within a perfect time bubble of their own creation. These strategies offer players a momentary respite from Arthur’s tragic fate but this alternative timeline is only a mirage. The original playthrough, which serves as the canonic storyline, always hovers over the alternative playthroughs as players can never fully escape Arthur’s death.

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