

Can 'Red Dead' be Redeemed?: Race and Gameworld Contexts

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Abstract

In the video game Red Dead Redemption 2, there are no Black communities in the game's version of the American West, and there is never any explicit mention in the game of American slavery or the racism that followed Black people West. In order to tackle the complicated issue of representing Black characters and communities in Red Dead Redemption 2 (and other narrative-based video games), this paper makes the argument that race and the social distinction between Black characters and characters of other races requires contextualization within both the narrative and game mechanics of the video game. For Blackness to be legible in video games, there must be an acknowledgement of the realities and material effects of white supremacy. In addition, using both Black digital studies and American media studies, this paper argues that the excisions of Black people and Black communities in much of American media are related to re-inscribing American origin stories which center whiteness and maleness as Americanness across media platforms. This paper investigates how the fabricated absences of Black people and communities are being imbedded into the narratives and gameplay of video games, as well.

Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Studios, 2018; hereafter *RDR2*) is one of the most successful and well-reviewed games of the twenty-first century; it showcases the amazing technical capabilities of eighth-generation video game consoles¹ and is currently being used to teach American history by some teachers due to its realistic depiction of the American West at the turn of the twentieth century.² Yet, regardless of its accolades, *RDR2* ignores the well-documented existence of Black communities in the American West in the nineteenth century and locates the American history of enslavement and the existence of Black people and communities solely in the areas of the game based on the American South and the suppos-

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edly far-flung and disconnected Caribbean. This is a conspicuous choice which illustrates that, far from being the apex of realism, *RDR2* privileges a familiar, yet flawed, version of the American West.

RDR2 also has some missteps in its portrayal of Black characters. There are two Black major characters in *RDR2*—Charles Smith and Lenny Summers—and both have conversations regarding their race with the protagonist, Arthur. Charles, who is half indigenous and half Black teaches Arthur to hunt in one of the very first missions of the game. On that mission, if the player decides to engage in conversation with Charles, Arthur says that he is surprised that Charles is still with the gang and that he “thought [Charles] might have moved on by now” (Rockstar Studios, 2018).³ Charles then explains that “Dutch is different...He treats me fair. Most of you do. And for a feller with a Black father and an Indian mother, that ain’t normally the case” (Rockstar Studios, 2018).⁴ The other Black male character, Lenny, has quite a few lines that seem to hearken to what life might be like for Black people in the greater gameworld. If the player decides to play the game Five Finger Fillet with Lenny while hanging around the camp, Lenny will say, “Before me, at least six generations of my family were born in chains and for the last three years, I’ve been running from every lawman and bounty hunter west of the Lannahechee River... So yeah, I feel lucky!” (Rockstar Studios, 2018). Lenny also talks about the death of his father by a mob of drunken white men and how people treat him in the South. But even though both Lenny and Charles gesture toward a world that is unforgiving toward Black people, there are very few elements of the game that substantiate the experiences of these two characters.

Because *RDR2*’s gameworld is missing any kind of explicit gameplay that would truly anchor what Lenny and Charles have said about their experiences, these bits of dialogue and conversations had in passing remain empty gestures. Essentially, the developers and writers of *RDR2* make the same mistake that Wilderson III (2010) accuses both Black and white film critics of making, which is that they lean into the (often stereotypical) identities of Black characters, instead of considering the fact that “the entire world’s semantic field... is sutured by anti-Black solidarity” (p. 58). It is not enough to have Charles and Lenny, and to a lesser extent Tilly, drop a few lines of dialogue about how being enslaved or how being Black in America has affected them, since “the social distinction between Whites (or Humans) and Blacks can be neither assessed nor redressed by way of signifying practices alone because the social distinction between life and death cannot be spoken” (Wilderson III, 2010, p. 91). Similarly, in *RDR2* the social distinction between Charles, Lenny, Tilly, and society at large falls short because of its reliance on (snippets of) speech alone.

Black Digital Studies and Video Game Textuality

Like Henry Jenkins (2004),⁵ I argue narrative and gameplay mechanics must work together to create games that can represent and connect to our most human experiences. In terms of *RDR2*, both the narrative and the gameplay skirt around any meaningful interactions with

Black Americans in the West and sequesters what passes for Black life in *RDR2* to the South and to urban areas.⁶ For example, the Black residents in the game's version of New Orleans are segregated into a particular part of the city, with no clear explanation as to why. There are two aristocratic white southern families within the game that are no longer as wealthy after the Civil War, but the reason for their sudden and sizeable decrease in wealth is left largely implicit. In essence, *RDR2* tries to present the effects of white supremacy and the recent end of the enslavement of Black people as an established fact, without any explicit mention of either white supremacy or American slavery.

This all leads me to my main argument that digital representations of Black people and Black communities require contextualization in both the narrative and gameplay of video games; the lack thereof is a version of digital social death. To analyze the lack of context for the digital representations of Black people and communities in *RDR2*, I will consider *RDR2* itself as a kind of text, and apply literary analysis to the genre, characters, dialogue, and narrative plot structures of the game. In addition, as stated above, there must be some analysis of the game's mechanics as well. I am a literary scholar, and I have no ability to write or analyze code, so I will not try to perform an analysis of *RDR2*'s game mechanics on that level. However, I can analyze aspects of gameplay that are controlled by the game's code. These features of the game include, but are not limited to, the content of missions and whether or not those missions are required to move forward in the game, the various kinds of NPCs and where they spawn, and the various landscapes of the game and the kinds of characters associated with each landscape. Therefore, through an analysis of the gameplay and narratological elements of *RDR2*, my argument that the digital representation of Black people and communities requires contextualization can be held "accountable to the medium-specificity of video games" (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017, p. 3).

To investigate the issues with the *RDR2*'s representation of Black people and Black communities, I utilize the work of Black Studies scholars like Spillers (1987), Wilderson III (2010), Wynter and McKittrick (2015), and others to consider how the gap between the Human⁷ and the Black subject might be translated into various media platforms. As I tailor my argument to digital texts and digital spaces, I use the work of Black digital studies scholars such as Gray (2020), Russworm (2017), and Benjamin (2019). Benjamin (2019) makes the point that regardless of the "techno-utopian hopes for... the digital era," it is clear that "[c]omputer systems are part of the larger matrix of systemic racism" (pp. 43, 78). This is foundational for my argument that the ludic elements of *RDR2* can be critiqued with the same kind of rigor as the narrative features of the game. Gray and Russworm have been helpful as I try to articulate everything that was missing from the narratological and gameplay elements related to the representation of Black people in *RDR2*. Gray (2020) argues, "Media scholars have long noted Black defeat is necessary to establish the white narrative order" (pp. 63). Similarly, Russworm (2017) notes "the flawed tradition of conflating Black identity with the pathos of sacrifice and suffering" (p. 119). My argument is that, along with Black defeat and Black pathos, Black excision or Black absence is central to the white narrative order in *RDR2*.

To execute an analysis that takes note of the absence of Black communities and the hollow tokenism of the Black characters in *RDR2*, I will employ a methodology similar to the counter-storying approach used by Thomas (2019) in her book *The Dark Fantastic*. I agree with Thomas (2019) that “shifting the focus away from white heroic protagonists and illuminating the imaginary stories of people of color at the margins can reveal much” (p. 11). Short of creating new stories that include Charles, Tilly, and Lenny (though I know those kinds of fan writings and communities exist), I argue that fuller and more complex narratives were possible for the Black characters in *RDR2*. I center Lenny and Charles in my analysis of the game’s characters, even though they were never meant to be the focus, because I believe that due to the connections between power, race, narrative, and interactive gameplay, there is much potential for critique at the margins of *RDR2*, as is true for many other narrative-based video games.

But before I get to my investigation of Charles, Lenny, and the main Black woman character in *RDR2*, Tilly, I want to link my argument to issues in American media more broadly. Video games are a global medium, but that does not negate the fact there are national stakes—national agendas and national consequences—when a game like *RDR2* perpetuates what amounts to propaganda about the American West as it was in 1899. As a scholar whose work is concerned with Black futurity and an insistence by Black people of ensuring and envisioning futures that includes them, the absence of Black people in *RDR2*’s version of the past was glaring. And it begged the question, whose past is this? And what are the stakes of perpetuating this partial history? Answering these questions requires an engagement with American media studies and the kinds of national discourses that cohere around Americanness and American origin stories.

American Media and Imagined Communities

In this section of the paper, I use the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* to analyze how depictions of Black characters in video game media are not just discriminatory, but part of a national dehumanizing project that has warped or erased depictions of Black people in American media to make sure the American national imaginary coheres around whiteness. Here, I am again indebted to my colleague Gray (2020) and her readings of both Jenkins and Bolin, as I read *RDR2* as a transmedia text that “involves intricate multiplatform narrative webs” and “requires [the] cultural synergy of a multitude of mediated formats” (p. 2). Various forms of media have always had a hand in creating a cohesive—if fallacious—idea of a unified and universal America. According to Nadel (2005), it was the black and white television that “helped codify and deploy whiteness as the norm for the United States in the nuclear age” (p. 3). Nadel (2005) also argues:

Because the composite of a nation’s institutions and its acreage cannot be comprehended as a visual totality, construing any nation, and particularly one as vast and diversified as the United States, requires an act of imagination, just as inventing it did. Television thus contributed profoundly to solidifying what we could call a ‘national imaginary,’ that is, a set of common images and narratives that people shared when they thought of America as a nation and themselves as its citizens. (p. 6)

Nadel's definition of an American national imaginary that both constructs and is constructed by a particular media platform, like the TV, is particularly useful for understanding the cultural work of video games. Even in a much more varied media landscape, it is clear that video games now have a role in maintaining the American national imaginary of the twenty-first century. There continues to be a "set of common images and narratives that people share" (Nadel, 2005, p. 6) when thinking about contemporary America, or, as in a favored branch of video games, a nostalgic⁸ version of the United States that excises many of the more problematic and violent aspects of its national past.

The original understanding of a nation and of nationality can be traced to the way print media helped people imagine national communities through new ideas of simultaneity (Anderson, 2006, pp. 36–37). Indeed, it is also clear that it is not just the act of imagination that ascribes a particular power to a national imaginary and to the media forms that help it cohere. The simultaneity with which the national citizenry engages a particular platform might be the single most important factor for creating narratives about the nation that become embedded in the national identity. Anderson (2006) defines simultaneity as "transverse, cross-time, not marked by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar," within homogenous or empty time (p. 24). Due to the connectivity allowed by the internet and various consoles and mobile devices, video games have become the twenty-first century realization of simultaneity. Temporal coincidence has become a hallmark of the current video game media landscape since many video games now encourage players to play synchronously with other players in online formats. Many of the video games with the highest production budgets create special added content and extended game worlds for the express purpose of allowing players to play in an online version of the game populated, not only with NPCs (or non-playable characters), but with many other online players. Even in terms of the time spent within a particular video game accomplishing various objectives, moving through the space and time of the gameworld operates as kind of empty or homogenous time. This gameworld time is measured by the particular temporality within the game or by nothing at all, which is a new and striking version of truly empty time. This internet-based simultaneity is responsible for making not only our online and gaming communities, but also the wider community of the nation, cohere.

In the past, print media also strengthened and expanded burgeoning national imaginaries by using narrative to present the people and discourses that belonged in the ideal nation (Anderson, 2006). In some ways, nations are always forming and reforming themselves, and in twenty-first century America that work continues through promulgating narratives and discourses through media, including video games, that masquerade as American history, but actually do the work of occluding and warping the history of America as it relates to marginalized populations. Often, though, the cultural work of using media to imagine the ideal members of the national community is not solely projected into the future or prescriptive, but also restorative or reparative of the national reputation. In America, there are now hundreds of years of media—print, electronic, and digital—that recognize white men as

ideal members of the national community, and which affirm that the lives and prosperity of white Americans are the primary concern of the nation. The American media not only focuses primarily on white people and their stories but also consciously and carefully weaves the stories of white Americans into the story of America itself while generally ignoring the contributions from Black people and other people of color. Specifically in terms of *RDR2*, it is clear throughout the game that the marginalization of Black characters and communities is in service to America's national self-image.

The American West and the Dehumanization of American Origin Stories

RDR2 is an action-adventure video game focusing on the American West and South at the turn of the twentieth century. I picked *RDR2* for my analysis of narrative-based video games because the genre of the Western is still firmly attached to American origin stories and interconnected with a pure and ideal Americanness. *RDR2* features a sprawling storyline taking place over several fictional states and focusing on the protagonist, Arthur Morgan. Arthur is a white, male outlaw approaching middle age. Arthur is the protagonist of the game, and players see most of the places and people of *RDR2* from his perspective. The increasing tension between Arthur's loyalties to the leader of the gang, Dutch, and his loyalties to the ideals that Dutch taught him heightens with every mission, and players can feel the stakes getting higher and higher. While Arthur is still the gun-toting, horse-riding anti-hero, in this particular story his decisions and his misgivings about his lifestyle start to weigh on him. The violence and the injustices he has had a hand in perpetrating age, sicken, and eventually kill him.

Why does the American West continue to be so attractive to media producers and consumers in the United States? Why does it remain necessary to construct the American West in ways that push minority populations and women to the margins? Even as scholars, like those of New Western History, have spent decades "challeng[ing] grand narratives of western progress," "disput[ing] the Eurocentric ideals of vacant wilderness, free land, and aboriginal people as nature," and "add[ing] to the standard formulas of western history the experiences and voices of those traditionally outside entrenched grand narratives" (Moos, 2005, pp. 8–11), the popularized version of the American West remains largely the same. The American West in *RDR2* is practically the same as the American West of *Gunsmoke*. It is all wide-open spaces filled mostly of white men in dusty lands dotted by small towns and the occasional mountain or river. This version of the West is a space where white men reign supreme due to the sheer absence of anyone else, even though we know based on data from that period that many people of different races and ethnicities, including women of different races, were present.⁹ The absence of most everyone who is not a white man is not an oversight; it is the point of these kinds of narratives. In the national imaginary of America, the American West is a place where white men can be both the worst and best versions of themselves—at times, both laudable—and where the stories, motivations, and feelings of white men are the only things that matter. With some very recent exceptions, according to American media the West was won and built by white men (and the occasional white woman).

The archetype of the intrepid white frontiersman is as old as America, and it is based on an even older and more deeply entrenched Western ideal of the Human that is defined as white and male. Wynter and McKittrick (2015) argue that this ideal white male human, or what they call Man₂, is “tied to epistemological histories that presently value a genre of human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets; the human is therefore wrought with physiological and narrative matters that systematically excise the world’s most marginalized” (p. 9). This idea that a Western understanding of the Human is at least partially constructed through narrative is important. Wynter and McKittrick (2015) make clear that all genres of the human are partially made up of mythoi—narratives and origin stories—even if part of the story they tell is that the figure of the human is “purely biological” (p. 11). Aside from being partially constructed by narrative, the “figure of the human is also inflected by powerful knowledge systems... that explain who/what we are. These systems and stories produce the lived and racialized categories of the rational and irrational, the selected and dysselected, the haves and the have-nots” (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015, p. 10). Part of the aim of this paper is to name the American national imaginary as one of these knowledge systems that Wynter discusses; one that is specific to the United States, thus bringing the goals of the nation and a particular set of origin stories to bear on our explanations of who and what is human, while also using the American media, and in this case, video games in particular, to disseminate to the populace origin stories that center white men.

As video game creators simultaneously seek to become more representative of the human experience and to further secure the position of the medium, they focus on the characters and stories that feature the most valued genre of human or the human beings that are most legible in the national imaginary—American white men. In an American context, the genre of human that is most present in the origin stories of the nation, and therefore most valued, is the white male human, and he, along with the narratives that help construct him, is situated at the top of a hierarchy of humanness. As Weheliye (2014) argues, the “volatile rapport between race and the human...determines the hierarchical ordering of the Homo sapiens species into humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (p. 8). It is this hierarchy of humanness that is as foundational to the American national imaginary as whiteness and maleness. Since the figure of the human is partially made up of narratives and origin stories, by excising minority populations from the origin stories of the nation, these same groups are also excised from a particular understanding of what and who is human and/or valuable to the nation. Only those humans truly viewed as human by the nation can ever be true citizens of America, and only those whose humanity is truly legible get represented in American media. That is why *RDR2*, a video game which taps into an American origin story based on a very specific and problematic version of the American West, has a plot only featuring the stories and motivations of the white men, Arthur, Dutch, John, Micah, and Hosea, in the Van Der Linde gang. *RDR2* perpetuates the idea that these white male characters are the most legible as human, as citizens, and as belonging in the Old West regardless of the various races and ethnicities who made the American West what it was.

Particularly in the version of the West that *RDR2* offers, it seems rather ludicrous that the protagonist, Arthur, while riding his horse on the many roads to and from the Western locations of his various tasks and missions, does not run into any Black men or women in the gameworld besides William—a Black man who is a minor NPC and who tasks Arthur with gathering herbs. There are the three Black members of the Van Der Linde gang, but in terms of the people that populate the world Arthur moves through, there are very few Black characters present, especially in the non-urban areas of the map. There are some Black background characters in Saint Denis, a city in the game that based on New Orleans. Saint Denis is the only true urban center in the game, and in stereotypical fashion, this is the place where there are obviously more Black characters than anywhere else in the game. The Black characters here are generally situated in the run-down section of town that is the game's version of a Black neighborhood. In the larger areas of the game world associated with the American West, sightings of Black characters are still few and far between. The people players meet along the way—the salt of the earth, good, hardworking people of the American West—are always white families just trying to eke out an existence in the harshness of the wilderness with little help from the government or from anyone else. When Arthur and the rest of the gang are pushed south, there are a few Black field hands skulking through the crops of rich landowners, but they are only a part of the southern landscape—a marker, so to speak, of the change in region and in the class of people who own a particular property.¹⁰

In the actual “American West”—a much more fluid and nebulous categorization than it is often understood to be¹¹—there were entire townships made up entirely or primarily of African American residents. In its portrayal of the American West, *RDR2* completely erases the existence of historically African American towns like Nicodemus, KS and Blackdom, NM,¹² among others. The game also ignores the stories of people like the Exodusters, who fled the South and Jim Crow for the West and settled in Kansas.¹³ In the most common stories of the American West, the Black American is never shown as one of those hardworking homesteaders trying to survive, even though it is clear from the historical record that these people existed, and in places, like Nicodemus and Blackdom, existed in fairly large numbers. The near absence of Black people in the American West of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and in stories about the American West more generally, is not due to the lack of Black people migrating West at the turn of the century. The reason Black people are left out of the stories of the American West is that the idea of the enterprising, hardworking, and perhaps upwardly mobile Black citizen runs counter to the way Blackness must be situated in the American national imaginary to codify citizenship as whiteness and maleness in the America of any era.

There are not many Black NPCs in the greater world of *RDR2*, but there are three Black characters that are a part of the Van Der Linde gang: Charles, Tilly, and Lenny. The inclusion of these three Black characters in the Van Der Linde gang is supposed to connote the radical equality and ethical core of the gang and of the game overall. As Russworm (2017) argues, “Black and brown bodies have historically functioned as signs of abjection and exclusion, on the one hand, and as catalysts for tolerance and radical change on the other” (p. 117). As I

mentioned earlier, the first thing that Charles references as his reason for continuing to stay with the Van Der Linde gang is that Dutch is fair, and that most of the gang treats him as an equal. *RDR2* is often lauded for having these three Black main characters and for the fact that Charles, Lenny and Tilly are an improvement from “Black NPCs, who are all presented without a diegetic awareness of their racial and cultural backgrounds (Russworm, 2017, p. 114). Yet, truly building out a gameworld in *RDR2* that would give more than shallow lip-service to its Black characters would require some acknowledgement of the different systems of power at play outside of the gang, and within the greater gameworld. *RDR2* is still based on an antiquated representational model of media that only requires a few members from each marginalized group to be present, even if there is no mention of why they are marginalized in the first place. The gameworld and the narrative of *RDR2* ignore the history of Black communities in the West and represents white supremacist violence against Black people as rare individual experiences and not as systemic issues plaguing every region of the United States. White supremacy followed Black people west, and there must be some representation of that in the way people interact with these characters.

Charles and Tilly are the two Black characters that survive to the end of the game, and Lenny is killed during a bank heist gone wrong.¹⁴ It is Lenny’s death that spurs Arthur’s burgeoning disagreement and dissatisfaction with his father figure and the leader of their gang, Dutch Van Der Linde. Though it is true that Lenny has several conversations about his past with Arthur, the enslavement of his mother and the violent death of his father have no real effect on his existence in the present, which makes all this information essentially meaningless from a player’s perspective. While Charles and Tilly may survive to the end of the game, Tilly is never more than a bit player around camp. She is one of several women in the gang who set up camp, hand out chores, and basically make life in the wilderness habitable. Like the Black characters, the female members of the gang are flat, background characters, with one exception in the character of Sadie Adler.¹⁵ Sadie is a welcome respite from the stereotypical homemakers and damsels in distress the game relies upon, but even her backstory involves being rescued by the Dutch and Arthur from a rival gang after her husband was killed and her home was burned to the ground.¹⁶ Her character is flat and completely overlooked as she recovers from the traumas of her losing her husband and her home in such a violent fashion. She is only legible by game standards when she is no longer traumatized and can become the game’s only female outlaw. By the end of the game, the stories of the women and the Black characters within the gang remain untold, even as Sadie Adler and Charles both help to launch the new protagonist John Marston into the narrative that takes place in the original *Red Dead Redemption* game. Charles Smith is the Black character with the largest role in the game, but as a character that is half Black and half indigenous, his main function in the plot becomes pulling Arthur deeper into the conflict between Dutch, the United States government, and the displaced indigenous Wapiti tribe.

The representation of the Indigenous characters in *RDR2* presents one example of how deeper engagements with racism and white supremacy are possible in narrative-based

games like *RDR2*. Elements of the *RDR2* narrative required a prolonged engagement with the Wapiti tribe and necessitated an explanation of their conflict with the United States Army. The engagement with the Wapiti is the only part of the game in which state sanctioned violence related to white supremacy is acknowledged as such, and that situational context is used to make the indigenous characters and their plight more sympathetic and more human. Unfortunately, players are not required to play all the missions related to the Wapiti,¹⁷ and much of the context concerning the clashes between the Wapiti and the U.S. Army are stashed in these optional missions.

In the fashion of many of the “cowboys and Indians” narratives that predate *RDR2*, the indigenous characters in the game have been typecast as simultaneously docile and vicious, which is an element of the American national imaginary that is just as powerful and enduring as the white cowboy and the excision of Black people from the American West. The differing resistance methods preferred by the older chief, Rains Fall, and his young son, Eagle Flies, is given a fairly stereotypical treatment in *RDR2*. Rains Fall is committed to saving what is left of his tribe, even if that means acquiescing to the government’s demands. Eagle Flies sees any compromise as weakness and refuses his father’s edict to stop fighting. Here, again, was a place where the writers and developers of *RDR2* could have introduced some complexity into the portrayal of these characters, but that would have required imbuing them with more humanness. By the end of the slate of missions concerning the Wapiti, as Arthur and Captain Monroe (an army officer who defects to help the Wapiti) spend more time engaging with the indigenous characters, it is clear these narratives and missions are not really about the indigenous characters. Instead, both the optional and mandatory missions focus on Arthur’s growing morality,¹⁸ Dutch’s continued fight with the American government and descent into madness, and the anger and motivations of the monied white men that Dutch has stolen from.

RDR2 is set in 1899 and in places based not only on the American West, but also the American South, and there is little to no explicit mention of the institution of enslavement or even of Reconstruction.¹⁹ In a game that purports to update and deepen the most stereotypical aspect of the Western by including Southern states in the narrative, it is interesting that nothing even related to segregation and racial prejudice was mentioned in the parts of the game that take place in the fictional version of The South. The only place in which the game allows a true discussion of slavery is when a few of the main characters are shipwrecked on the tropical island of Guarma. There they meet a Black freedom fighter, Hercule Fontaine, and help him liberate the Black islanders from a powerful and violent sugar plantation owner, Alberto Fassar.²⁰ In the missions that take place in Saint Denis and Guarma the antagonists are European capitalists and barons, as if American industrialists were not still deeply involved with economic interests in the Caribbean. These missions also mostly ignore the connections between the U.S. government and the national wealth created in the American South during the era of American slavery. It is strange that *RDR2*’s interactions with enslavement happen away from the mainland of America, as if that is not a storyline that could in some way exist as adjacent or even complexly interlinked with a narrative about the American West.

Curiously, within *RDR2*, the only explicit race-based violence taking place in the world is in the Caribbean; a place so remote that the characters only go there because they are shipwrecked there after a storm. The Black islanders on Guarma are like the Black characters that fade into the background as set pieces of the American South at Braithwaite Manor. In an even more dehumanizing fashion, the Black characters in Guarma serve as a macabre backdrop of torture and death. As players maneuver Arthur through the skirmishes on various parts of the island, Arthur frees islanders every time he gains ground. Most of them are not even “human” enough to murmur a word of thanks or give Arthur much needed information about the terrain or the number of enemy combatants waiting for him. They are broken shells of human beings, and they skitter away from Arthur like scared animals in the dark. Like the native characters in *RDR2*, the presence of Black characters in Guarma does not necessarily mean that any Black character aside from Hercule is presented as human, reserving the most humanness, yet again, for the white male characters in the game. In *RDR2*, enslavement is relegated to a kind of far-flung exoticism that largely lets America off the hook through neatly excising its own history of slavery. Though fighting to free the Black inhabitants of Guarma, Hercule is originally from Haiti. Here is a character from a country where the most successful slave uprisings in history took place, and he must implore—read: bribe²¹—these random white men to help him fight. Arthur and the other members of the Van Der Linde gang are prisoners on Guarma just like the Black islanders, yet the game allows them the power and agency needed to free not only themselves, but the Black islanders, as well. Even Hercule is not granted that power.

In a story set in America in 1899, with all the racial injustice sweeping through country at that time, I find it interesting that neither Lenny nor Charles were chosen for the spate of missions that take place in Guarma. Guarma was a game location where true context might have been possible for the Black characters and that chance was not taken by the developers and writers of *RDR2*. It is almost as if bringing Charles, Lenny, and Hercule together, would intimate something veracious, yet sinister, about America itself. Perhaps, if Charles and Hercule had met, the game producers would have been forced into telling a more complex and human story about Charles being both Black and indigenous. The characters in the game would have had to explicitly consider race in ways that called some of their decisions and beliefs into question. A meeting between Charles and Hercule would have required a reckoning with Dutch about how he is always willing to use and discard Black and indigenous lives to get what he wants and what he feels like he as a white man deserves. A meeting between Charles and Hercule would have required a consideration of America’s contributions to the dehumanizing discourses and media representations that help define global Blackness. That meeting would have made clear the hypocrisy of America, and in this game that taps into one of the most familiar and important origin stories of America—that of the American West tamed and controlled by the white man—there is no room for a true critique of American mythology or the violence perpetrated in the name of the American nation.

The Flesh Made Digital: Representations of the Black Body in Video Games

Like many players and critics, I remain concerned about the dearth of Black characters in video games. Yet, the larger problem is that even when Black characters are present and given larger roles, they are not imbued with more (or sometimes any) humanness. Moreover, it does not matter if video games are “full of Black characters or other protagonists of color,” if “the race of these characters is not at the core of their cultural identity” (Dery, 1994, p. 189). In other words, solely giving a video game character a brown skin tone does not make that character in any way representative of Blackness. With very few exceptions,²² players are left with Black characters that basically exist as a form of digital Blackface because video game producers are more focused on using stereotypes to give Black characters a kind of legibility that centers on the white male gaze. Again, whiteness and maleness are the basis of being legible as human in American media, and the representations of Black video game characters disconnected from the history of the nation plays a part in making Black people legible only as subhuman or inhuman.

When scholars try to have this conversation about the legibility of Blackness in American media, and in video games specifically, characters such as CJ and Franklin from the Grand Theft Auto series of video games, specifically *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), become the focus and operate as a kind of low-hanging fruit of stereotypical Black characters. CJ and Franklin are Black characters from what look to be lower middle class Black neighborhoods in video game versions of Los Angeles. Both characters are either a part of gangs, or at least adjacent to them, and are accessorized with “urban streetwear” and other styles of clothing that are used to denote particular racial and class positions. Both look to crime as the only way to make money, and both go on wild crime sprees around Los Angeles to accrue more and more money and prestige. Franklin and CJ give players access to representations of Black and urban communities in unprecedented ways, yet the success of these characters is often judged by the distance they move away from these same communities into better (whiter) and more expensive neighborhoods. The characterizations of both CJ and Franklin are hollow and problematic, and the critiques are warranted. But I want to get past the haircuts, the sneakers, and the baggy clothes, and analyze the digital representation of the Black body beneath all of that.

The Black characters Charles, Tilly, and Lenny in *RDR2* are perfect for discussing the representations of Black people and Black bodies in video games because they are not generally characterized in the same kinds of overtly stereotypical ways as Franklin and CJ.²³ Charles, Tilly, and Lenny have no stereotypical quirks or accessories that are used to distract from their often blank and deindividualized representations. They all wear the same kinds of clothes as the white characters, have similar accessories and speak with similar accents, but this form of pseudo-equality is instead flattening and dehumanizing. In *RDR2* Charles, Lenny, and Tilly, regardless of their scanty backstories, have very few interactions in the gameworld that portray the specific dangers they face as Black people in America. They are supposed to be representative of Black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, and yet there is no mention of the violence these three Black characters might face while moving around the various far-flung regions of the western and southern United States. These characters are robbed of the kind of context that makes Blackness

coherent and evocative in a way that does not center the white male gaze.

In *RDR2*, there is no understanding or acknowledgement of the fact that Lenny, Tilly, and Charles might have a different experience of certain states and cities than the white members of the Van Der Linde gang. For instance, the Lemoyne Raiders—a fictional amalgamation of several Confederate paramilitary groups that existed around the turn of the twentieth century²⁴—are an important and violent antagonist of the Van Der Linde gang for a sizable chunk of the game.²⁵ Yet, even when the gang is set upon by members of the Lemoyne Raiders, none of the Black characters are singled out, so the racism championed by this group only exists in the abstract within the game world because Charles, Tilly, and Lenny are not affected by it any more than the other characters. What characters like Charles, Tilly, and Lenny show us is that for Black characters in the gameworld to be truly legible requires a narrative and gameworld that acknowledges the racist and white supremacist context which helps to create these characters. As we see with the Lemoyne Raiders, it is not enough for a game like *RDR2* to have racist militia and a few Black characters, if there is no narrative understanding of what could happen if those two entities meet.

As a result of there being no mention of how enslavement and other kinds of race-based violence have specifically affected Charles, Tilly, and Lenny in *RDR2*, their digital Black bodies have been cut away from what amounts to a digital representation of the “flesh,” which then forestalls other attempts to give these Black characters any approximation of subjectivity. Spillers (1987) describes the “flesh” as “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography” (p. 67). Spillers (1987) also goes on to say that “if we think of ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness” (p. 67). As a primary narrative, one that tells the true story of the Black body in an American context, the “flesh” is the ultimate contextualization. Thus, by erasing the racialized context—the American Grammar²⁶ of the pre-symbolic, bruised, beaten, and violated Black body—of Black characters like Charles, Tilly, and Lenny in American-based video game worlds, there is no longer any possibility for those characters to represent the humanness of Blackness in a digital context.

In the absence of any context necessary to make Blackness legible as human, it does seem that many video game creators expect the brown skin of their Black characters to do a large part of the work of contextualizing and filling out the existence of these characters. In *RDR2* the brown skin of the three Black characters in the Van Der Linde gang and a few lines of dialogue are supposed to tell players everything they need to know about them. All players know is that they are Black characters, but that does not connote any information related to the gameworld. Spillers (1987) does make mention of a relationship between the “flesh” and the skin in which the skin becomes a kind of stand-in for the “flesh” (p. 67). Spillers (1987) writes, “these undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (p. 67). Accordingly, Michelle Stephens (2014) argues that “the skin in a Black context, has

become in modern times a master signifier for the specificity, the particularity, of race. It is the object produced by what Frantz Fanon and Paul Gilroy call 'epidermalization.' It is the sign for race understood purely as scopic sight" (pp. 1–2). But in *RDR2* there is no specificity of race. There is no American captive body: that body can only be located in Guarma in the gameworld. With no racializing context, the power of the skin to represent both the body and the "flesh" of the American Black characters is non-existent. With no information from within the game to situate Black characters as meaningful subjects created by the world that surrounds them, players must rely on information from outside of the game to make sense of characters like Charles, Lenny, and Tilly. And the decontextualization of these characters makes them nothing more than an animated picture of a human.

Part of why video games must rely on contextualization so much to create a kind of subjectivity for their characters is because digital Black bodies are always already within the symbolic order. As Stephens (2014) argues, the flesh "represents the body that sits on the very edge, on the underside, of the symbolic order, pre-symbolic, and pre-linguistic, just before words have meaning. It has yet to be sealed away into an image or bodily ideal" (p. 3). Video game versions of Black bodies are both images and a kind of bodily ideal from the point of creation. There is no point at which Black characters and their bodies within video games can be pre-symbolic, so without context they are abandoned to the symbolic order, but only as it is viewed from above by the white male gaze. Without another modality of viewing these Black characters, they become nothing more than icons²⁷ that are simultaneously empty of internal substance but heavily laden with whatever discourses that help to situate the Black body as other, marginal, or inhuman.

Video game developers have yet to truly reckon with the complicated nature of portraying the Black body in digital spaces partly because as the Black body exists in the symbolic order, it is dislocated from a specific time or any particular space. The caricature of Blackness that is most popular in American media can be placed in any time period and in any fashion necessary for whichever American origin story is being repackaged. Black characters with no subjectivity, with no true context, are as common in American media as the Western and the cowboy, and the flesh is a primary narrative that the American media can never let be part of the American origin story.

What We Can Learn at the Margins

Part of the genesis of this paper was a question about how to represent Blackness in video games. How do video game creators avoid stereotypes and hurtful discourses that are attached to depictions of the Black body in media? In a moment when it is abundantly clear that the post-racial hopes of the early days of the twenty-first century are dead, how do we translate race to video games in ways that do not play into harmful stereotypes? I want to be clear that I do not believe the onus is on a video game like *RDR2* to assess or redress the violent white supremacy and anti-Black solidarity that structures the world and the United States, in particular. However, I do believe that video game developers are responsible for

attending to structures of power as they relate to racism with same exacting focus they address all other matters of the game. For example, in *RDR2* players not only have the ability, but are encouraged to collect 144 individual cigarette cards, thirty collectible dinosaur bones, forty different period-specific hats, nineteen breeds of horses, and hundreds of other collectibles and accessories. There are also bounties on game characters based on actual historical outlaws, there is a hidden serial killer mystery, and there are five states worth of landscape and NPCs. These game elements in *RDR2* are meant to display a historical tether to reality. In fact, one of the most interesting critiques of *RDR2* is that it is too realistic; so realistic, in fact, that this realism impedes on the game player experience.²⁸ Two glaring elements of play in which that is not the case, is in the portrayal of the game's Black characters and the excision of Black people and communities from the game's version of the American West.

There are ways for writers and developers to improve the representation of Black characters and Black communities in video games. Mainly, the gameworld must corroborate, not negate, the experiences of Black characters as it relates to white supremacy. The kinds of context that I discuss in this paper are not meant to interfere with gameplay. One key example is *Assassin's Creed Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2013). *Freedom Cry* centers the experiences of Adéwalé, a member of the Brotherhood of Assassins who escaped from slavery as a teenager. The main story is about the conflict between the Templars and the Brotherhood, but the subplot concerns Adéwalé's return to the Caribbean and his growing investment in the Maroons' resistance. *Freedom Cry* makes historical information about all the various groups of people on the island available to the player and weaves that information into the gameplay in ways that make it useful, but not intrusive. Ubisoft, the developer of the Assassin's Creed series, is not without its own set of missteps, but specifically as it relates to *Freedom Cry*, the game itself and the protagonist Adéwalé prove that Black characters, Black communities, and Black histories can have a place in video game media that is not reliant upon stereotypes and excision.

The final question is can consumers and critics of video games hope for a future in which developers of AAA and AAA+ titles put as much effort into faithfully portraying the structures of power at work in our nation and our world as they do into making sure the male horses' testicles shrink in cold weather?²⁹ This level of representation will require a critical and creative reckoning with the way racism and white supremacy continue to be re-inscribed in the popular forms of media we all consume. We all must look past the amazing gameplay of games like *RDR2* and refuse to accept the perpetuation of racist narratives as par for the course. If nothing else, I hope this paper makes clear that true equity in gaming will be difficult until there is equity in American media more broadly. It is clear digital spaces will not be exempt from the American imaginary. No discursive space is. If players and creators alike seek to define humanness in ways that can be digitized, both are undertaking a complicated problem with an uncertain end. As lovers of video game media and willing consumers in the burgeoning video game market, when we allow the dehumanization of people of color and women in the versions of American history we tell ourselves, we accept that dehumanization will be attached to American futures also.

Endnotes

1. Eighth-generation consoles include the Playstation 4 and the Xbox One. Eighth-generation games can also be played on other devices via streaming services like Stadia or played on PCs through Microsoft.
2. See “*Red Dead Redemption* Being Used to Teach American History at University of Tennessee” by Deveney (2021).
3. See *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Chapter 1: “The Aftermath of Genesis” mission.
4. *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Chapter 1: “The Aftermath of Genesis” mission.
5. This is a reference to the ludology vs. narratology debate. Ludology is defined as game mechanics and the study thereof (Jenkins, 2004).
6. In this sense I am using urban as it relates to a city and/or the opposite of rural. However, the racist implications of the term “urban” is not lost on me. According to Gray (2021), “when the terms ghetto, inner city, or urban are used, they are mostly referencing Black spaces, to situate the reader in something ‘other’” (p. 90).
7. The capitalization of Human is used intentionally to denote the theoretical concept as discussed by Wilderson III (2010).
8. See “Video Games as Objects and Vehicles of Nostalgia” by Makai (2018). Here, I’m not talking about nostalgic video games as objects in terms of retrogaming, but as the perfect vehicle for a certain kind of nostalgic yearning that is neither reparative or restorative.
9. See “African-American Women on the Western Frontier” by Hardaway (1997) and “African American Men in the American West, 1528–1990” by Taylor (2000).
10. See *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Chapter 3: “The Curse of True Love” mission, parts 2–5.
11. “What is the American West? Neither this bibliography nor any other will answer that question. The American West can be defined through various social, political historical, and mythical interpretations...Once in American history, the West was western Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Ohio. After the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the American West suddenly extended to the Pacific Ocean. Some historians talk of the Trans-Mississippi West while others define the West as others define the West as those continental states through which the 98th longitude runs, plus the states west of that line. [Yet] most works on the American West do not include two of our most western states, Alaska and Hawaii.” (Junne, 2000)

12. See “African American Homesteader ‘Colonies’ in the Settling of the Great Plains” by Friefeld et al. (2019).
13. See “Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction” by Painter (1992).
14. See *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Chapter 4: “Banking, The Old American Art” mission.
15. Sadie Adler was the game’s best attempt at creating a female character. Though I think her characterization dipped into being foolhardy and impetuous, she was also strong, resilient, and as good of a cowboy as any of the men in the gang. After the gang disbands, she becomes a bounty hunter and helps John Marston get on his feet in the epilogue.
16. See *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Chapter 1.
17. See *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Chapter 6: “Archeology for Beginners,” “Honor Among Thieves,” and “The Fine Art of Conversation” missions.
18. Only if Arthur is played as an honorable character. He can also be played as completely dishonorable and extremely violent.
19. Dutch does mention finding southern aristocrats annoying, but he leaves it there. He makes no note of the particular dangers of the American South for the Black members of his gang, and those characters make no mention of their fears. It is also implicit in the fight between the Braithwaites and the Grays that ending slavery has negatively affected the economic portfolio of both parties.
20. See *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Chapter 5: “Welcome to the New World,” “Hell Hath No Fury,” and “Paradise Mercifully Departed” missions.
21. Arthur and crew only helped Hercule as a means of helping themselves escape the island.
22. Such as the character Adewale from the *Assassin’s Creed IV* DLC add-on *Freedom Cry*.
23. I take issue with Arthur finding Charles in Saint Denis gambling on his own fights. There is something very stereotypical about the brutish nature of this money-making scheme that seems in opposition to what we know of Charles’ character at this point.
24. See “Lemoyne Raiders” (Red Dead Wiki, 2022).
25. See *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Chapter 3: “Further Questions of Female Suffrage,” “Friends in Very Low Places,” “A Short Walk in a Pretty Town,” “Blood Feuds, Ancient and Modern,” and “The Battle of Shady Belle” missions.

26. A reference to Spillers' (1987) essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."
27. See "Understanding Comics" by McCloud (1994, p. 27).
28. See "Red Dead Redemption 2: Can a Video Game be Too Realistic" by Wills (2018).
29. See "Red Dead Redemption 2: Horse Balls Shrink in Cold Weather" by Morrison (2018).

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