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Unsung heroes: Reconceptualizing a video game as a work of art

ABSTRACT

A veteran arts educator's entrance into the heretofore unknown world of video games, from encountering the community of players to daring a first-hand experience playing Red Dead Redemption 2. Buoyed by her desire to see her actor son's performance in the game, the author plays to the end and emerges with an understanding of the game as a work of art.

KEYWORDS

video games
aesthetic attention
co-construction
narrative
art
Red Dead Redemption 2

The doorbell rang just as the doctor at St. Denis (a fictive town in the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* [RDR2]) was telling Arthur (my playable character in the 80+ hour game) that he had incurable tuberculosis. Devastated, I raced to the door, explained quickly to the technician that I couldn't sign anything for the moment, and rushed back to finish watching that cinematic cut into the regular action of the game.

As I returned to the door, I could hear the technician stifling a laugh. Clearly, he found it amusing that a woman of my advanced age was immersed in a video game. 'Which one?' he asked pleasantly.

'*Red Dead Redemption 2*', I replied, and his mouth fell open. 'You know it?', I asked. 'Who doesn't?', he exclaimed. And of course, he did.

RDR2 was one of the hottest games of 2018. The *New York Times* reported it making \$725 million in the first three days it opened, making it the ‘highest grossing opening weekend of any entertainment product – ever’ (Suderman 2018: 8). ‘I tried it’, he said, ‘but I don’t really have time to stay with the story with two young children climbing all over me’. Yes, that would be hard. For me, at this stage in my life, my only regular interruption was my little dog who thought the horses, dogs, and other animals so realistically portrayed in *RDR2* were in the room with us. Lucky was also frightened by the sound of shooting guns that admittedly happened frequently throughout the game.

‘How’d you get into it?’, the technician asked. ‘My son is Dutch van der Linde’. Dutch is the sophisticated, enchanting, evil, manipulative, philosophic, idealistic, intellectual outlaw whose charisma and treachery are at the centre of the game.

‘You mean the character in the game is like your son?’ ‘No’, I replied, ‘the character in the game is my son’. He was baffled. ‘The actor who plays Dutch van der Linde is my son’. ‘Oh, you mean, he gave the voice to the animated figure?’. Apparently, this guy had never heard of performance capture and how the game’s animation is framed by digital recordings of the actual actions and expressions of the actors. ‘Performance capture’, I explained, ‘you know they wear the leotards with electric ping pong balls all over them?’ ‘Oh yeah’, the technician nodded, clearly impressed, unsure by what. ‘Well, good luck with it’, the young man said, ‘Hope you win’.

Win? Proof positive that he had never played *RDR2*, a game that has no winners or losers and a course of action determined by individual players. For most of the time, as the only playable character Arthur Morgan, (a misguided big-hearted gunslinger), you’re an actor in the theatre of the game, riding your horse, tackling missions as directed, trying to do your best. For the rest of the time, you’re the director, deciding what comes next in the narrative, making choices that range from virtuous vs. damnable courses of action to what outfit your character will wear.

Fully within the shape and direction of the narrative, you are co-constructor of a story...or is it a movie? Now and then, with filmed action cut-scenes, it definitely is. Either way, the *New York Times* calls the game a ‘work of art’ (Suderman 2018: 8); an online fan calls it an ‘experience’; I call it an ‘adventure’. No, a ‘story’. No, a movie in which I am the protagonist and the director. A reader of lines; a writer of outcomes. I agree. ‘A work of Art’.

ORIGINS

My son, actor Benjamin Byron Davis, worked on the *RDR2* project for five years. Five years of flying back and forth between Los Angeles and New York, memorizing countless lines (the script was 2000 pages long), rehearsing in locations on either coast, performing in black spandex ‘mo-cap’ (motion capture) suits, gun belts at his side, riding a sawhorse that would appear as a Tennessee Walker or an Arabian, imagining in a warehouse studio space, the vast landscape of the wild west.

Reportedly, the hardest part of it all was the nondisclosure agreement that the ensemble had to sign, assuring Rockstar Games that the actors would not reveal a minute of what they were doing, let alone that they had any knowledge that there would ever be a prequel to the earlier game, *Red Dead Redemption*.

When the game finally emerged, it was met with thunderous enthusiasm and commentary suggesting it had broken the boundaries between technology and art, exploring territory traditionally reserved for the arenas of dramatic or cinematic arts. Beautifully written, gorgeously acted, and outrageously picturesque, the game welcomes players into an imaginary world in which they can ride their horses all night, explore new directions as the sun rises, pause to camp under a shading tree or alongside a slippery river, feel a gentle rain, marvel at a star studded sky, and inter-relate with characters as close as fellow outlaws in the Van der Linde gang and as mysterious as strangers alongside an unknown road.

The terrain would become familiar, the dead tree marking the road to camp, the tree lined path to the Braithwaite Manor, the train tracks, water ways, and jagged narrow mountain paths. But I knew nothing of this when the *RDR2* ensemble of performance capture artists came to *Fan Expo Boston* at the Boston Convention Center in August, 2019.

THE FANS

I had never attended a fan expo or comic con before. These conventions famously provide a venue where literally thousands of comic book/video game fans can gather. Walking about as if it was another day at the mall, are life sized superheroes, video characters and other creative inventions of comic book types. The costumes are pristine and professional looking and even the youngest children look as if they've just emerged from their movie trailers down the street.

Walking through galleries of booths selling such collectible objects as original artwork and vintage comic books or giving away trinkets that promote an upcoming game, I was struck by the creativity with which the atmosphere was infused. And when I reached the designated area in which fans could actually meet their favourite video game actors and get an autograph or a selfie, I was astonished by the length of the lines. I knew this happened around the world; Benjamin had already taken part in conventions in Hawaii, Philadelphia, Texas, and Kuwait. But what impressed me greatly, moved some chord within that is devoted to the arts in education, was that practically all of the fans waiting on line to meet the real Dutch van der Linde, had a gift in hand. The gifts were drawings of Dutch from various scenes in the game, or 'wanted' posters of the artist's design – an artistic response to the work of art that was the game; and the artwork itself was first rate. Surely some were more crudely drawn than others, but all the work presented had clearly been crafted with care and affection.

REFLECTION

Later, Dutch van der Linde (Benjamin) and Arthur Morgan (Roger Clark) sat on a panel and talked about the experience of working on *RD2*, the challenge of learning masses of lines in short periods of time, developing a role over time, working in those spandex suits, and especially the non-disclosure agreement that kept them from telling anyone what they were up to. It made the ensemble closer, only being allowed to talk about it all with each other. And then the questions came from the audience. I was sitting between Captain Marvel and I think the Joker, in a room filled with costumed articulate adults framing the most sophisticated questions, reflecting their knowledge of the

narrative of the game, the process of production, and its place in the greater context of video game play, culture, and history.

‘What other artistic arena was it most like?’ ‘Literature’, the actors replied. ‘When did Arthur discover Dutch wasn’t all he had thought he was?’ and among this interesting back and forth, an occasional fan would ask Arthur to call his horse or Dutch to say out loud the resonant phrase, ‘I have a plan’. The fans waxed rhapsodic about the performances and I realized two things: (1) the attachment these players felt with the actors from the game was more intimate and profound than the connection audiences have with actors in plays and movies and (2) the only way I would get to experience my son’s celebrated performance was to learn to play *RDR2*.

THE CHALLENGE

It was then that I bought a copy of the game (*RDR2*) and a Play Station 4 (PS4), the video console that enables game play. Installing the PS4 was not complicated but it took me a few days to find the courage to think that I was capable. The console came with a controller with which the player enters and navigates the game and learning how to use that smooth handheld device took me the better part of two weeks. That was not just because of lack of confidence, not just because I believed that such a device belonged to another generation, but also because the controller is a pretty complicated device. There are so many options for control that I quickly ordered the *Red Dead Redemption 2* guidebook which fearsomely is 385 pages long. The print is small. Enter my handheld large red magnifying glass.

I practised and practised but mastery came slowly. My ineptitude with the controller prevented me from keeping my horse on a steady keel and caused me to make awful mistakes. I would unintentionally punch my horse or jump off it when I meant to jump on. I speak in the first person, but ‘I’ in the game is the character of Arthur Morgan, a lovable gun slinger who has made some poor life choices but basically seeks to do good (when he is not shooting and looting bad guys).

Arthur and I are connected by that controller; we decide where he will move, what he will wear, if he will shave his beard, give money to the collection pot for Dutch’s gang, go into a saloon and play poker or check into a station and pay the bounty on our head for some or another murderous mistake. Consider the intimacy of the relationship when you and he are the lead character in the game. The controller allows that connection.

With each week of game play (one to three hours a day; occasionally a decadent lot more), my facility with the controller increased and remarkably, as I got more facile, the game gave me more things to do – there seemed a reciprocity of skills and tasks. I felt scaffolded by the game (and that incredibly detailed guidebook) and that allowed me to invest fully in the experience of this alternate world where gangs were disappearing but still shooting it up and revenge was disparaged but still motivating bloodshed.

As we moved from the cold snowy opening scenes of the game throughout seasons of flowering and abundance, with animals (reportedly 200 species) gambolling through meadows and towns, the environment became more detailed and complex. There were entries in Arthur’s journal (drawings and words) to read and interpret, books on shelves that you could open and study, abandoned interiors to explore and loot, Native American lore to inspire, the chill of a wave of industrialization meticulously portrayed as a backdrop to the

development and deterioration of characters to whom we grow unreasonably attached.

‘Let’s ride’. Is a refrain you hear in the game that informed my play every time I returned to it. My designated chair; the open guidebook and the magnifying glass; my coffee on the table; a few post-its stuck to the mug – reminders about which is a punch which a repel; the smooth feel of the PS4 controller in my hand, and I was ready to play. ‘Let’s ride’. And ride we did, through a landscape of images and words and music that sustained and engaged. A story line filled with excitement and nuance, chapter to chapter; through decisions that had consequence and proved our autonomy and effectiveness; attending to detail, collecting herbs, horses, weapons – so much to encounter and learn. I came to be unsurprised this game took eight years to create. It would seem to require more.

THE JOURNEY

Meanwhile, my son had announced to his fans that his 75-year-old mother was attempting to play *RD2* and they responded with wonderful comments of support. They were moved I’d taken such trouble to see what my son had done, moved that an ‘older’ person would make the effort to experience ‘their art’. I was buoyed by their support; they called my efforts ‘wholesome’. They made me feel welcome and proud of my novice exploration of the world they knew so well. And what did others know of the magic I was discovering in an area the uninformed consider a ‘waste of time?’

Perusing the topics of some of the very many academic articles on the subject, I noted that while there is persistent concern for the effects of violence in games, scholars in the field recognize a variety of positive aspects. Of interest to me, they acknowledge what I felt first-hand: the experience of ‘presence’ as in actually being there within the game as well as a sense of personal efficacy as I moved along (Vorder and Bryant 2006). So much to learn from historical content to usable skills such as manual dexterity, spatial awareness, and the attention to detail inherent to aesthetic education.

As I came to the end of the *RDR2* story, final scenes brought me to tears. The characters found the ways they were meant to find but not always what I would have wished for them. Since my son is a veteran actor, I have seen him in many roles, but never as an animated version of himself – a version that visually walked his walk and audibly exploited the dark and playful regions of his wonderful voice. My journey had allowed this encounter with an extraordinary performance of an extraordinary role. And I had also had the extraordinary experience of playing a role; well, sharing a role with the character Roger Clark so marvelously brought to life. I became facile with a venue I had previously only seen from a distance – a grandson ignoring me, attending somehow to this mysterious arena for play. I entered that world, became absorbed, and didn’t hear when I was called for dinner.

IN CLOSING

As I came into the finish line, I texted some reflections to my son:

the ‘game’ was somewhere between my recollections as a child of playing dolls that I dressed and placed in imaginary scenes and playing cowboys and Indians with those plastic figures whose legs were bowed

so they could ride securely on their little plastic horses. But beyond the imaginary part of it all; it was so real. As if I was living in another time when folks travelled over roads that were narrow paths that led over wooden bridges and through rushing streams. And when the weather changed, my first worry was whether Arthur needed a coat or a bigger hat and we kept going along beautiful trails, rowing wooden boats, jumping on wagons-noting all along stars in a changing sky, old houses that seemed familiar-as if they were from history and not an artist's pen. And my attention to detail throughout spilled over into the real world beyond. I would hear voices in the supermarket that sounded like the background voices in RDR2.

(B. Davis, personal communication, 24 January 2020)

How glorious the moment (the last time) when we saw the whole gang (fractured at that point but going off together) following Dutch on his white horse 'Let's ride'. Words cannot recreate for someone who has not entered this world what it contains and inspires. Such a range of emotions and encounters and I have yet to do anything with the watches and rings in my satchel, the playing cards, the dominoes, the letters we received. The world that was created here is rich with possibilities that I have still to explore, but it has taken me months to come from front to back, from ignorant thoughts of 'just a video game' to real admiration of a 'work of art'.

(B. Davis, personal communication, 24 January 2020)

Like other works of art, we never capture it all in one encounter, we can return and find new things over and over and the questions the work asks us are never fully answered, fraught with possibilities for interpretation. For me, this time, my question is: 'where was redemption among these murderous heroes, these virtuous criminals, these friends to the end or not?' These outlaws, dealing death left and right, but so moved by the losses of each other. Evil and goodness all around, no clear lines between. Arthur's dream, a triumph against the winds and tides of the rest. And my triumph by the way, learning something new for which I had no experience or ability, awakened by the challenges and delight of this extraordinary creation.

(B. Davis, personal communication, 24 January 2020)

What a privilege to play.

(B. Davis, personal communication, 24 January 2020)

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