

“Outlaws to the End” – A Study of the Social and Political Reality of Rockstar Games’ West

11.8.2021

[Game studies](#) [Ideology criticism](#) [Red Dead Redemption](#) [Rockstar Games](#) [video games](#)

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This article examines the relevance and applicability of ideology criticism to the study of video games. The aim is to highlight the sophistication and detail of the experiences video games render for a player. As video games have become highly popular and mainstream, we consider that it is crucial to study the political and ideological realities they offer. In this article we commit a close reading of Rockstar Games’ Red Dead Redemption series from an Althusserian perspective and discover that critical analysis yields interesting insights of the social order designed for the game world. To form a better understanding of ideological underpinnings of these designed systems of play, we also inspect the material conditions under which they were created. We find that ideological and political analysis of a blockbuster game contributes to a better understanding of ways in which games operate and what kind of social and political realities they offer.



Introduction

In October 2018, Take-Two Interactive announced that with over \$725 million in worldwide retail sell-through during its first three days, Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) had “achieved the single-biggest opening weekend in the history of entertainment” (Business Wire 2018). CNBC noted how the sales dwarfed even Disney's *Avengers: Infinity War* movie that grossed more than \$640 million in its first weekend on the big screen, representing the highest opening weekend in box office history at the time (Huang 2018).

While still relatively young, video game industry has grown over the past decades into an industry capable of producing globally recognized media commodities with notable revenues (Kerr 2017). As video games are actively consumed in all age groups, they can no longer be considered as marginal pastime (ESA 2020; Kinnunen, Taskinen & Mäyrä 2020). Instead, video games have an increasingly significant role in the formulation of collective imaginary (Murray 2018). As Graeme Kirkpatrick (2013, 10), who has explored the connection between video games and social imaginary, argues, “If we all play games now, it is important to understand how they fit into our lives and affect the other roles that we have as individuals in society.”

While game companies themselves are often keen to deny any political intent, and even players easily consider virtual worlds apolitical (Murray 2018), it is clear that video games

“institute a way of thinking and acting in their design and [...] interpellate the player through pleasure” (Mitchell 2017, 57–58). Game designers often aim at creating consistent and compelling game worlds, which immerse a player, and thus make a player invest in the experience. These investments are preconditions for political and ethical experiences (Mitchell 2017, 63). By exercising ‘procedural rhetorics’ (Bogost 2007), video games persuade a player to accept a certain world as inevitable. In this sense, all video games make arguments through their stories and mechanics, for example, and should thus be considered as spaces of ethical and political potential.

Sociologists Muriel & Crawford (2018) have argued that the rhetoric of neoliberalist freedom is ever-present when considering video games as experiences. Not only are games reproducing the idea of player’s freedom to choose, but also to understand their lives in terms of a choice. More importantly, they also place the responsibility of the consequences of these choices solely on the player. As players progress through the game, they are simultaneously learning its algorithms and internalizing its ideology. To Bown (2018), this makes video games devices that at the same time are operated by a player, and that operate on a player.

This article focuses on *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games 2010) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018), two action-adventure games that introduce us to an extensive Western-themed virtual world. While Rockstar Games also has published a title called *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), it is excluded from this study, because it has almost nothing but a thematic connection to other *RDR* titles. The focus of the paper is on the single-player experience, thus the multiplayer modes and additional downloadable content (DLC) of both titles are also excluded.



Image 1. Two ladies accompany John Marston to civilization in *RDR*'s opening scene. Source: Screenshot from YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVesO1ar14>.

From ideological and political perspectives these games seem to carry on the tradition of the European, more precisely the Italian Western, which as Fisher (2014, 78) contends, repeatedly satirised “the failure of bourgeois liberalism to live up its pretensions of freedom and tolerance”. According to him (Fisher 2014), Italian film-makers stripped their Westerns of any morality placed by their American predecessors and filled their movies by addressing contemporary issues with uncompromising terms.

According to [Heikkinen & Reunanen](#) (2015), the application of Western themes to video games has required its design to that particular environment. While it could be argued that the theme worked more as a superficial setting in early video games, in the West of Rockstar the theme provides the foundation to the life-like ecosystem it renders for a player. Also, as earlier Western games could be easily categorized by genres such as shooters, racers, role-playing games and so on, *RDR* games combine all of these. As such, the aim of Rockstar ultimately resembles a lot of the aim of the company called Delos inc. in the TV series *Westworld* (HBO 2016-), where the company offers a lifelike Western themed playground populated by androids for its wealthy customers to freely play in. As in *Westworld*, in *RDR* a player is introduced to a cast of Non-Playable Characters (NPCs), who lure a player into adventures which can range from simple treasure hunts to train robberies or mayhem and murder.

In addition to being some of the best-selling games of the decade and widely acclaimed by critics, these games have also spawned controversies. In this respect, *RDR* games offer an apt case study for exploring how contemporary video games operate as ideological apparatuses. In methodological terms, our aim is to consider the relevance and applicability of ideology criticism to the study of video games. The purpose of this consideration is to highlight how ideological and political analysis of a blockbuster game can contribute to a better understanding of ways in which games operate and what kind of “ideological literacy” they presume. In addition to producing a close reading of particular aspects of selected games, we aim at critically connecting the political imagination of virtual worlds to the material conditions under which these games are created.

All in all, as technical developments have enabled video expression to become more sophisticated, it has become crucial to consider how to study political and ideological realities of these thoroughly designed virtual worlds (Pérez Latorre 2015; Murray 2018; Gunkel 2018; Crawford & Muriel 2018). From the Marxist perspective “the attribution of personal responsibility and guilt relieves us of the task of probing into the concrete circumstances of the act in question” (Žižek 2012, 5). Thus, the function of the Marxist analysis of video games is to make visible the existing social order in these designed systems of play. An analysis of what is possible and what is acceptable in a game world reveals insights into its ideological underpinnings. If video games are understood as playable representations (Murray 2018), and representations are seen to be in the frontline of power relations, it can be argued that a player is playing in the frontlines of power relations in every moment of gameplay. Marxist reading of a video game then provides a potential to reveal probabilities of a game world that are made to appear as necessities. The recognition of this notion is important because it allows us to examine these virtual worlds as places where to test out in action other possible forms of existence.



Image 2. At the gates of Saint Denis, the pinnacle of civilization. Source: Screenshot from PS4 by author.

Video Games as Ideological Apparatuses

According to Kirkpatrick, Mazierska & Kristensen (2016), several domains of Marxism can be potentially relevant to the study of video games. Games are not only an important manifestation of contemporary digital technologies but also intimately tied to the new forms of capitalism. In the following, we discuss Marxist starting points in connection to other game studies theories that have inspired our analysis, focusing especially on the relationship between the game and its players. Both video games and Marxism are much about power relations. For Althusser (2012), a society is conceptualized as a system, where different classes compete for the possession of the State power and the Ideological apparatus. Ideology operates in subtle ways, not forcing itself upon individuals but by making particular identities appear more natural and obvious than others. The relationship between the game rules and the player reminds us about the twofold meaning of the term ‘subject’ as both an agent and someone placed under authority (Sotamaa 2009, 70).

Garite (2003, 5) argues that “video games operate on players through updated, aggressively interactive and immersive form of interpellation”. For him, Althusser’s theory of ideology and repressive and ideological state apparatuses is suitable for video games, because games “grant players unprecedented degrees of freedom and control, while simultaneously bombarding them with a relentless series of limits and demands.” (Garite 2003, 7). Garite

expresses a concern with the work of gaming by noting that the focus should not only be on the “cognitive and physical labors of players, but also the ideological work performed by games themselves” (2003, 8). Because of the power relation present in video games, a player learns that these apparatuses are acceptable, thus they also strengthen a player’s belief in the game world (Quijano-Cruz 2008).

According to Žižek, through ideology “the senseless contingency of the real is thus “internalized”, symbolized, provided with Meaning” (Žižek 2012, 4). The function of the critique of the ideology is “to reveal the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency” (Žižek 2012, 4). This line of thought is highly applicable to video games because they render for a player a world where only some things are made possible, while others are barred to exist at all (Murray 2018). When considering highly successful contemporary open world adventure games, for example, they often offer a relatively free world to explore, but to experience the narrative, the player must often succumb to the designer’s vision and advance through the story in a predetermined way. There can be a number of ways to succeed, but it is crucial to keep in mind that everything possible in these worlds is there by design (Zimmerman 2007; Murray 2017; Murray 2018). Thus, this freedom is largely illusory and in fact, a player often has little agency to determine a game world’s events and outcomes (Mitchell 2017). Therefore, these kinds of video games offer a directed freedom or as Muriel and Crawford (2018, 88) describe it, “experiences of experiences”. As Mitchell (2017, 77) argues, “the player doesn’t really make any choices that the game has not already made for them”.



Image 3. Even the post office tries to lure a player to a life of crime by offering robbery missions with better pay than honest work. Source: Screenshot from PS4 by author.

This article adopts a view that while video games unquestionably are a part of the cultural ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) (Garite 2003), they also in fact simulate Althusser's theory in action (Quijano-Cruz 2008). A player is rendered as a subject, who is interpellated through different institutions of a game (ISAs) to progress in it, but also at the same time to absorb its ideology. When considered from the Althusserian perspective, in video games the State power and the State apparatus are controlled by a video game's designers. The game enforces all kinds of rules on players, making them accept their submission by forcing them to choose their freedom from premeditated choices. Thus, a video game's institutions "call out" or "hail" a player and offer a particular identity and induce a form of behavior, which a player accepts as natural or obvious, based on the feedback given by the game world. A player gives his undivided attention to a game to complete its story, which often requires a considerable amount of time. From this perspective a game designer's task is to interpellate a player to invest in the game experience, and at the same time make a player more susceptible to absorb its ideology. However, what is noteworthy here, the ISAs of video games do not necessarily resemble their real-life counterparts. What this means is that a video game's side quests and other activities and tasks can be also considered its ISAs.

Game worlds form complex, highly manufactured and thoroughly designed totalities, in which some things are made visible while others remain hidden, thus engaging in construction of a particular worldview (Mitchell 2017; Murray 2018). Considered this way,

video games become fantasies that are “enacted within a fully realized simulation of a world, which sees itself inevitable, although it is not” (Murray 2018, 144). As such, they can be considered to contain social and political ideologies, which are disseminated through video game experiences. These experiences are powerful, because we tend to consider them as our own (Muriel & Crawford 2018).

Although acting under the authority of the game rules, players are not entirely subordinate to the game. In most cases, a game does not force the player to do anything. The player is the center of the game world, because without the actions of a player, the passage of time changes nothing. If a player chooses to spend his time by riding around with a horse, a player is free to do so. Still, while games like *RDR* make it possible to be experienced as cowboy simulators, the game’s mechanisms do not induce this kind of behavior (at least not from the narrative perspective). Rather, by giving the most lucrative rewards on completion of its story missions, it calls or hails the player to focus on them.

Bown (2018, 76) argues that “when we play, we fall into a dreamlike gamer state, and the affinity of the player and the role they play is about a complex connection between the unconscious of the gamer and the unconscious of the game”. Immersion is thus less about making the game experience seem as real as possible and more about the “interpellation of the player to this dream state in which the game can have the greatest effect” (Bown 2018, 86). The main concern for Bown is the increasing potential for the corporate control of the desire itself. He argues that in a large part “the rhetorical power of video games is about naturalizing dreams, wishes, and desires of a political moment by making a player experience them as their own” (Bown 2018, 77).

Even though Bown can be criticized for considering a player to be an almost helpless automaton (cf. [Meriläinen 2020](#)), he explains thoroughly why we should be concerned about the future politics of video games, and technology overall. The development of these experiences requires a lot of resources, thus restricting the possibility to construct them in the hands of a few. Game companies themselves are often keen to deny any political intent. Game companies’ positioning of themselves resembles that of a state in Marxist understanding of ideology, in a sense that either the companies, in the classic Marxist sense, “do not know it, but they are doing it”, or more cynically “they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it” (Zizek 2012, 8). In the real world, this can be observed in capitalism’s inability to recognize its tendency towards financial and ecological crises

(Panitch & Gindin 2012); in video games, this notion becomes apparent by game companies denouncements of any presence of ideology at all (mainstream video games), or by making their ideological emphasis explicit (serious games).

Methodological Starting Points

By acknowledging that games are not fixed objects and not created in a vacuum (Flanagan & Nissenbaum 2014), one can start to take steps towards sophisticated understanding of videogames as an expressive medium, similar-but-different to other forms of expressive media (Bourgonjon 2014). It is evident that video games adopt means from other media, however they are not restricted by their logic, but rather function by the logic of their own (Murray 2017). According to Gunkel (2018) the role of critical analysis of game worlds is to distinguish and expose a video game's structure, its operations, and its implications. In this sense, while "playing games is the most crucial element in any methodology of game studies" (Mäyrä 2008, 165) states, formal analysis of our "playings" needs to be supplemented with more context-aware readings (Karppi & Sotamaa 2012).

Following Flanagan & Nissenbaum (2014), we believe that any analysis of a video game should account to the distinguishing properties of the medium, i.e. rule-based architecture, player agency, interactivity, and gaming as cultural phenomena. Fernández-Vara (2015, 56-57) divides game analysis into three aspects: the context, game overview, and formal aspects. While the study of a game's context enables one to situate a game historically, culturally, socially and economically, the game overview places its focus on the features of a game that distinguishes it from others. However, the center of attention in this type of analysis are the formal elements of a video game (the rules of the world, the relationship with the rules and the fictional world, values and procedural rhetoric and the representation). At the same time, it is important to remember that while games can create worlds of their own, these fictional universes are in many ways connected to the traditions directed by real-world culture and economics (Karppi & Sotamaa 2012).

In this study, ideological and political analysis of *RDR* games aims to produce a better understanding of ways in which games operate, but also to offer a way to uncover the ideological discourses present. The notions made are then reflected to the world outside the magic circle of a game to connect the political reality of Rockstar's West to the material conditions under which they are created. The primary data of this study consists of

experiences of these staged experiences. For the purposes of this study, both installments of the *RDR* series were played through twice (*RDR* on xbox360; *RDR2* on PS4). During the playthroughs, notes were collected and then reflected to formulate an understanding of the experiences they provided. The first playthroughs of both installments were approached with a more relaxed attitude, with an aim being on enjoyment and entertainment, only collecting some random notes that felt important (such as encounters, events and random thoughts). Second playthroughs were conducted in a more analytical manner and the focus was placed more on how the gameworld and its inhabitants are presented. Also, much more time was spent exploring the gameworld based on the knowledge acquired from comparing my initial gameplay experiences to others' experiences presented online on different discussion boards and social media. During game sessions, notes were scribbled on notepad during playing and then after the session, the notes were used to form mind maps to remember events and outcomes, and collect all the thoughts and ideas during the sessions.

The goal of this method is to explore the game world, get to know its inhabitants, their backgrounds and stories they tell, to understand what kind of social reality the game world is simulating and what kind of a place that is to live. From these observations an understanding of what kind of social and political reality Rockstar's West offers is formulated.

Rockstar's West as An Ideological Apparatus

[Heikkinen and Reunanen](#) (2015) note that Italian Western began to have influence on video games from the 1990s onwards. According to them, "later and current Western games appear to be going through a phase of comparative realism, genre-consciousness, and even "revisionist" themes [...] something that gradually took place in cinema several decades earlier." Rockstar Games' *RDR* series is a prime example of this. Fundamentally, both titles consist of two "empty" vessels, the game engine (RAGE) and the genre (Western). When they are combined, they construct an open world, which possesses a full reality by itself. This reality is molded by linear narrative story missions and emergent narratives, to formulate a lifelike ecosystem, where a player gets to experience life of the last outlaws. However, as the player character and his story are predetermined, a player has little to say on what and how the character or the game world becomes.

The story of the games takes place between the years 1865 and 1914 in an imaginary version of the United States. While *RDR* focuses on the end of the Van Der Linde gang, *RDR2* recalls

the story of the earlier exploits of the gang. As the *RDR2* is a narrative prequel to the events depicted in *RDR*, in this study we have chosen to analyze them in chronological order.



Image 4. Dutch Van Der Linde explains the mission multiple times during the playthrough of *RDR2*. Source: Screenshot from [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p08FIdjrbEU), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p08FIdjrbEU>.

RDR2 tells a tale of desperate bandits who are fleeing from powerful and insane psychopaths responsible for running the state. The state is governed by violence, corruption, and deceit, and the law is a tool by which the most vicious psychopaths get rich. A player is told that he is fighting a good fight (for utopia, robbing the rich to give to the poor), but it soon becomes apparent that the end of history, in the form of neoliberal capitalism, is here and a player is fighting a losing battle. Only way to resist the state, or advance one's alternative ideals, is by revolt, crime and murder. The absolute cruelty of the state is later made clear in *RDR*, where John Marston is extorted to hunt down his former gang members and even by complying, still ends up being betrayed.

Considering that the Van Der Linde gang is having financial troubles, a player is pushed towards completing the main missions to sort out the gang's problem. The main missions of the game are largely about various criminal activities; thus, the discourse of these games seem to imply that acquisition of wealth is acceptable by any means necessary. However, *RDR2* also promotes the idea of redistribution of wealth, because in it the stealing is justified, when the victims of the crimes are the rich. There is a possibility for a player to try to make it by doing honest work and having healthy hobbies, however the more a player invests in the

life of crime, the larger the economic benefits become. As such, *RDR* games paint a cynical worldview where the most respected citizens are psychopathic lunatics, and all the positions of authority and power are in fact occupied by criminals, whose sole motivation is to get power.



Image 5. The untamed wild is beautiful, even though everything exists to be consumed. Source: Screenshot from PS4 by author.

Outlaws for Life

In *RDR2*, the Van Der Linde gang forms a kind of a society of their own. The game highlights in many parts the fact that the player character is not working solely for himself, rather his aim is to achieve prosperity for the whole collective. The gang's leader Dutch Van der Linde motivates the player by promising this beautiful utopia of peace and harmony, which can be achieved with just a little more money.

The gang has chosen to live outside the established society and the law. It was founded by Dutch and Hosea, who rules the gang with iron fist, even though especially Dutch is first represented more as a charismatic idealist. Other members of the gang are formed by a group of criminals, dissidents and other marginalized groups. They exist in the game to contribute to the narrative coherence of the game world, but also by offering a player various side quests and thereby interpellating a player to invest in the story.

The gang commits various criminal acts which drive them into conflict with multiple opposing forces. These include for example wealthy oil tycoon Leviticus Cornwall and the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The gang plots to rob the assets of Cornwall, who responds by recruiting the Pinkerton Detective Agency to hunt down the gang. The Pinkerton Detective Agency is led by Agent Andrew Milton and his subordinate Agent Edgar Ross, and they become central figures to the story. Especially Agent Edgar Ross proves to be an important character in the forming of the world of the RDR series as he sees civilizing the West as his mission and is willing to fulfill this mission by any means necessary.

Dutch controls the gang with an iron grip. Multiple times he addresses the gang and promises them a future of peace and prosperity in Tahiti. The better times ahead could be achieved by fulfilling Dutch's plan, which he describes multiple times as "I have a plan, we rob Uncle Sam and leave". The narrative elements do not describe the nature of this utopia in a more concrete fashion though. However, considering that the gang functions by everybody contributing to the collective stash, the band seems to be in favor of socialist values. For the gang, life isn't about the survival of the individual but collective. As the story progresses, a player gets emotionally invested with the gang and in one sense, by continuing to complete the tasks and missions, starts to believe in Van der Linde's promise of utopia. Or at least that seems to be the game designers' intention. However, at any point of the game, a player can "check the books" to see what other members of the gang are bringing to the table. It soon becomes evident that the player, as Arthur Morgan, is the most generous contributor to the "common good". After finding out that he is terminally ill, Morgan starts to see through Van der Linde's lies, and starts to get a sense that the gang wasn't about the prosperity of the all in the first place. The gang starts to fall apart and Morgan places his focus on saving a few of the "right-minded" friends and prepares himself for a final confrontation with Van der Linde and his remaining loyalists. Disappointed in his life, he pleads with John Marston to change and leave the gang life behind.

It is, as if, the game tries to imply that we had our chance to build a better community (multicultural socialist utopia?), but the selfish egoism of our fellow humans prevented that from happening and thus, the "real" America, the real land of the free, is forever lost. A player gets a cold handed reminder that there is no honor among thieves. It is also a traditional story about how power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. If the utopia for the Van der Linde gang was built upon a Robin Hood-ish scheme of robbing enough money from the rich to start a self-sufficient community somewhere in Tahiti, it only

worked as a façade for Dutch Van der Linde to motivate his gang to keep committing crimes for his personal gain. When considering the gameplay, the Van der Linde gang is in fact unsaveable, because no matter how much money a player collects to the gang, it remains chronically poor.

After Morgan dies, a player assumes the role of a fellow outlaw, John Marston. John gets lost during the final train robbery, and since Dutch can't locate him, he is left behind to die. However, Marston survives and finally achieves his dream of living a peaceful ranch life with his family. In this he finally succumbs to the state and accepts his destiny. The game even congratulates the player for this submission in the form of a bank manager who states, "Congratulations! You are now a real American, indebted and owned by the bank!", when John is applying for a loan to buy a farm. His life becomes filled with mundane tasks of a ranch life, until his past finally hunts him down. Even though his wife pleads him to stay on the straight path, a life of violence is inescapable for John. "We all get caught eventually John, you just need to decide by who", as Dutch so eloquently puts it.

Interestingly, this notion of human greediness mentioned above, is emphasized in the story of John Marston experienced in *RDR*. In an almost anarchistic fashion, a player is told to not trust no authority except themselves, when the representatives of the state capture Marston's son and wife, extorting John to hunt his former gang members. John is forced to make a deal, agreeing to help if the state promises his freedom.

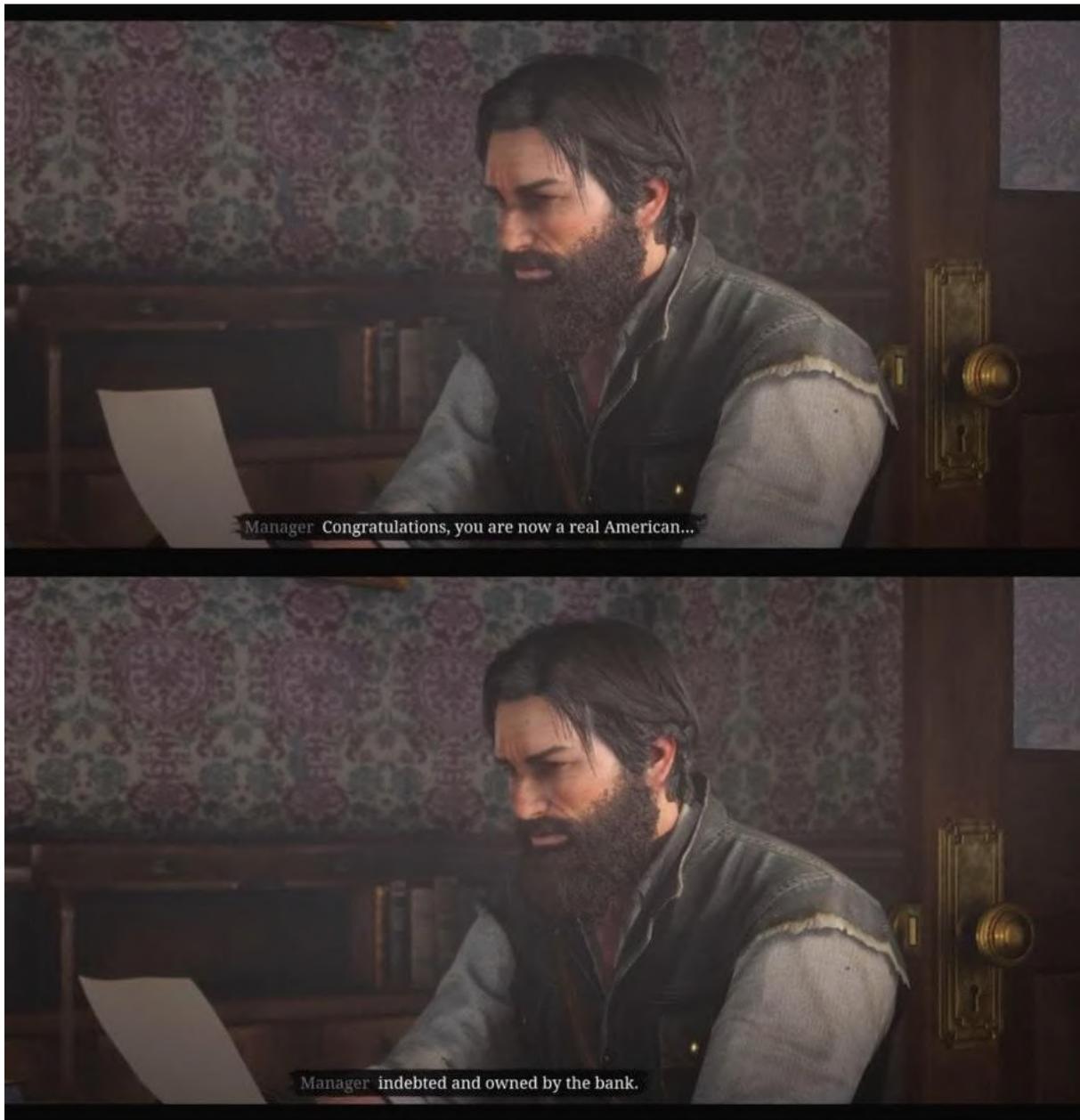


Image 6. At the end of RDR2 Marston is finally a real American. Source: Screenshot from [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7evYeJQRoMI&t=338s), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7evYeJQRoMI&t=338s>.

Outlaws to the End

RDR begins by John confronting his former gang member Bill Williamson. It leads to a violent stand-off, at the end of which Bill shoots John and leaves him to die. His life is saved by the rancher Bonnie McFarlane. Feeling indebted to Bonnie, John decides to help her by running various errands around the ranch. After a while, he starts to get into contact with other local residents, who little by little drive John to again commit more and more serious crimes.

After running various errands for the snake-oil salesman (Nigel West-Dickens), dysfunctional alcoholic (the Irish) and psychotic graverobber (Seth Briars), to attain their help to complete the task given by the state, Marston finds himself in the middle of revolutionary Mexico. In *RDR* Mexico is depicted as backward, degenerate and exotic. The revolutionary war is fought between colonel Augustin Allende and revolutionary Abraham Reyes. Marston joins the fight on both sides of the war. In the end, he chooses to help the rebels led by Reyes to win the war, thus enabling the revolution in Mexico. To Marston, this choice is made more out of personal loyalty than ideological judgement. This highlights the cynical fact, that no matter who is controlling the government, they are never representatives of the people's real interests. In turn, this implies that the real revolution is a never-ending struggle. As such, it is also ridiculing the view that neoliberalist capitalism is the experience of deliverance from the constraints of ideology. It doesn't necessarily enforce any other form to be better but promotes the idea that we should pay close attention to our surroundings. If not to revolt, at least not to leave anything unquestioned. However, during the revolutionary war, John manages to kill Bill Williamson and Javier Escuela, leaving Dutch Van Der Linde to be the final gang member to hunt down.

John returns to the United States and he befriends a Native American named Nastas and obscure ex-Yale professor Herold McDougal. With their help John discovers Dutch's current whereabouts and that he has started again to propagate his utopia to a new band of followers. Finally, Marston gets to confront Dutch. With the Bureau of Investigation and US army on board they take on Dutch and his new gang. An epic battle ensues, at the end of which Dutch ends up committing suicide, thus freeing John from more killing, as if it anymore made any difference.

John returns to his home ranch, where his wife Abigail and Uncle are waiting for him. His life becomes peaceful again and he focuses his attention to teach his son how to be a rancher. However, this peace is shattered, when the government agents accompanied by the US army come to visit the last remaining members of the Van Der Linde gang. By killing John, the state reveals its true coercive nature by betraying its promise of freedom to John.

Even though John was a murderous outlaw he was committed to change, and the deal with the government was to his actions to grant him his freedom, it was shown that the government can't be trusted. However, the game's story doesn't end by the demise of John. A couple years after his father's death, Jack Marston decides to pursue the outlaw way of life.

Revenge on his mind, he is committed to hunt down the man who he sees responsible for his father's death. Jack tracks down the recently retired Edgar Ross and challenges him to a duel. Jack gets his revenge by killing the man who double crossed his father, and the Marston legacy continues to live on.

Long Live the Alternative

While *RDR* mourns the loss of a way of life, in *RDR2* the alternative ways to neoliberal capitalism still exist or at least a dream of them is still alive. In *RDR2* an alternative is presented by depicting an utopia, as if there is the possibility for something else than neoliberal capitalist society, and this utopia is achievable. The game world of *RDR2* pushes forward progressive values like ridicule for racism, support for women rights movement and so on. In this sense, *RDR* series offers glimpses of potential for a gaming canon that is both mainstream and progressive in content.

While it is evident that Rockstar criticizes neoliberalism, at the same time it also questions the personal motivations of progressives and the viability of their goals. However, the game lets the dream of the alternative (revolutionary utopia) live in Jack, the third playable character in the *RDR* series. Although the player gets to control him only briefly in the final chapter of the story, his role proves to be crucial when analyzing the ideological aspects of *RDR* games. If John Marston represents the idealist, and Arthur Morgan's role is that of a martyr who gets betrayed by his own comrades; Jack Marston represents the educated youth, a version of a new kind of woke man.

Jack is being homeschooled by his mother, loves books, rather picks flowers than participates in fishing and so on. However, Jack is also keen to learn from his father and in the end of *RDR* chooses to continue his father's way of life. Thus, while John and Arthur represent more rough and rugged versions of masculinity, the role of Jack is to represent a new version of a man, implying that the revolution's future is at the hands of this woke and educated youth. From this perspective, *RDR* games can also be seen as an apparatus of woke gaming, which refers to "video games [that] mirror and embody the injustices we see throughout popular culture and in society at large" (Gray & Leonard 2018; 5). This same struggle against the corrupt system is present in Rockstar's popular *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series, where the protagonists pursue the similar outlaw way of life experienced in *RDR* only in more contemporary environments.

Rockstar Games have developed themselves a game engine, designed to construct worlds where inherently the road to success (equaled as riches) is always related to a life of crime. This notion is the very essence of ideological apparatus at work in these video games. Thus, they share a similar view presented in the radical Italian Western films and condemn neoliberal capitalism as a syndicate of cruelty, corruption, and coercion (Fisher 2014). This ideology is enforced by filling the game world with different ISAs to disseminate the game's ideology to the player. These ISAs consist of different institutions of the game, which interpellate a player to participate in various tasks to progress the story. From a narrative perspective, for example money, which is equaled as success by the game's rules, is in fact almost irrelevant, since no matter how much money a player collects, the result of the game remains the same.

However, what is noteworthy, a player can choose to ignore narrative elements of the game and play *RDR* as a cowboy simulator. This might lead a player to consider its ideological underpinnings radically differently. Thus, when considering the ideological underpinnings of virtual worlds, it can be argued that a progress through a video game's story missions becomes an important aspect of its experience. This does not mean that a player should neglect emergent gameplay or exploration, but rather highlights the importance of getting to know the game world through its inhabitants and places. Often seemingly random events in the game world are used to interpellate players to accept its rules. For example, in *RDR2* a player can torture suffragette, but it makes a player lose honor. Interestingly, killing the KKK does not cost honor. This implies that the game world is governed by morals, even though in this instance rather twisted morals. Thus, the ideology of the game world remains the same and is not dependent on a single player's play style. The twisted morals of Rockstar's West is highlighted by the fact that for example in the first installment a player can rob and kill as he pleases, but hiring a prostitute is impossible even though they are seemingly available. Here we arrive at the artificial limits placed on a player's freedom. Even if a player decides to play the games as a "good guy", he is forced to beat innocent bystanders during train robberies for example. Thus, a player is reminded that he is first and foremost an outlaw in various ways. In *RDR2* limits of player freedom are underlined by allowing a player to season meat with herbs and cook it to gain health, but swimming underwater is impossible.

From the Althusserian perspective, one could argue that the Van Der Linde gang assumes the role of the proletariat. Even though the gang's objective isn't necessarily the destruction of the State, their aim is still to hold the State power of their own. Thus, if they had been

successful in establishing their utopia, they would have had control over the State power and thus the State apparatus of their own. However, their hope of utopia was crushed by its leader succumbing to selfish egoism and finalized by the emergence of the neoliberal State. The State, which is depicted as adamantly seeing itself as an only civilized way to live, thus, justifying for itself the violent repression of the alternatives.

Not only does this underline the inevitability of the hyper capitalist state later emerging in *GTA* series (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009; Pérez Latorre 2015), but also, doom other alternatives to always fail. Even both *RDR* games' slogans seem to highlight this. While *RDR2* positively proclaims "Outlaws for life", *RDR*'s more pessimistic "Outlaws to the end" implies the inevitability of what is to come. This also echoes contemporary reality, where it is, as Žižek (2012, 1) notes, easier to imagine the end of the world than to seriously consider alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. However, one can also read it as a parody of neoliberal exceptionalism. By making the "only alternative of neoliberal capitalism" a reality, *RDR* series ridicules the arrogant selfishness of neoliberals themselves and thus advocates resistance to its ideals.

Considered as a whole, Rockstar's open world games (*GTA+RDR*) build a view of the history of America developing from the wild to the hyper capitalist theme park. As the *RDR* series focuses on laying building blocks and foundations of future society to come, *GTA* series simulates this society in effect. The revolution almost died with the Van der Linde gang's demise, but the alternative continues to live in the margins, when the son of John, Jack Marston, decides to continue the outlaw way of life. However, society is left to be managed by the evil forces of technology, corporations and bad government.

Coda

The aim of this article was to underline the importance of ideological analysis of video games. As video games play an increasing role in the forming of collective imaginary, it becomes crucial to study who gets to speak and what is at stake in these virtual environments. Analyzed from the Althusserian perspective, it becomes evident that video games function as ideological apparatuses on two levels. First, they are a part of cultural ISA and thus participate in discussions where shared codes are formulated and reformulated and communicated further. Second, video games themselves render in front of us completely new worlds with their own ideological apparatuses.

As discussed above, the scope of Rockstar's games is enormous; the development of *RDR2* took eight years and roughly one billion dollars with over 2,000 staff members working on the game. In this sense, the record sales mentioned in the beginning of the article, are not an accident; Rockstar might be the only game company in the world, which can spend this much time, money, and manpower on a single title. At the same time, while *RDR* games can contain progressive values, one can argue that as a company Rockstar seems to betray the very ideology it often promotes in its games. The somewhat controversial reputation of Rockstar Games is not solely due to troubling content in its games, but it has also been publicly accused of being a repressive workplace with mandatory long working hours, unpaid overtime and the atmosphere at the workplace being a culture of fear. In the aptly titled article "Inside Rockstar Games' Culture of Crunch", Jason Schreier (2018) describes Rockstar Games' as being renowned for cutting and redesigning big portions of their games. This often leads to considerable modifications to its narrative, the core gameplay mechanics, and the game's overall presentation, highlighting the direct connection between the game content and the modes of production.

It is apparent that ideology criticism is highly applicable to the study of video games. What we see here is that video games are capable of sophisticated and detailed expression and it is thus crucial to study what kind of worlds they render for us. Challenges for this type of study lie in the recognition of the fact that one cannot escape his own background, and one's previous experiences have at least some influence on how a (game) world is perceived (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Thus, each person is going to decode the meaning of a cultural object in a unique way based on their circumstances in life (Murray, 2018). However, most importantly, what kind of games we consume and produce tells something about us and what we value.

According to Zizek, "we live in 'a society of spectacle', in which the media structure our perception of reality in advance and render reality indistinguishable from the 'aestheticized' image of it" (2012, 1). Contemporary video games play a crucial part in the constitution of mainstream ideologies and forming of collective imagination by reshaping, discussing and reflecting different social and political issues. If we agree that video games provide a playground for simulation of our possible futures, our reading of the *RDR* series can offer a critical reflection on the current ideological climate and the potential shape of things to come. At the same time, while video games can play a powerful role in introducing potential futures (and pasts) to us and let us experience the consequences of our actions, it is important to bear

in mind that these virtual worlds are not created in the vacuum. For games to create increasingly progressive and meaningful reflections of society and ideology, we also need to invest in more sustainable cultures of production.

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Cover illustration by Juho Tuominen