Narrative Liminality, Ambient Operations, and the Database Western in Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* Videogames

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Abstract:

This article reads Rockstar Games' Red Dead Redemption series as a new form of Western, the database Western, which is found to be marked by a state of narrative liminality as the symbolic forms of database, narrative, and play interact in a way that privileges the logic of the database. Analyzing the videogames' ambient operations, specifically their random events, it is argued that the database Western's underlying logic severs the genre from history. In doing so, it produces a politics of evasion and performs the cultural work of a withdrawal from history.

In this article, I argue that *Red Dead Redemption*, a series of open-world Western shooters published by Rockstar Games, exemplifies the genre of the database Western, which is permeated by instances of narrative liminality that are central to the production of meaning in these videogames[1]. My argument revolves around one particular characteristic of *Red Dead Redemption*'s gameworlds, their 'ambient operations,' and three symbolic forms that converge in these instances: 'database,' 'narrative,' and 'play.' The liminal areas in which these three symbolic forms blend into each other define the cultural work of these videogames. As database and also play take primacy over narrative, the Western genre is reconfigured in a way that drains it of history and, thus, politics, which ultimately produces a politics of evasion in its own right. The cultural work resulting from this can be considered a withdrawal from history.

The article begins with a brief overview of the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise and the genre of the database Western before I introduce the concept of ambient

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[1] Following Brendan Keogh, I "have committed to the one-word spelling *videogame* (as opposed to *video game*), which sees videogames as a hybrid of audiovisuality and game aspects" rather than specific, digital (meaning: computer-processed) types of games, but games after all (Keogh 12, n2).

operations, illustrated by some examples. These form the foundation for the argument that unfolds afterwards in which I examine the entanglements of database, narrative, and play as they converge in the ambient operations of *RDR* and *RDR2*.[2] This analysis reveals the database Western's liminal status, which informs *Red Dead Redemption*'s politics and, hence, the cultural work of the database Western as a genre.

Red Dead Redemption and the Database Western

Both *Red Dead Redemption* videogames are set in turn-of-the-century America—that is, the turn from nineteenth to twentieth century—and both tell the stories of outlaws trying to leave their outlaw lives behind, with *RDR2* functioning as a prequel to its predecessor.[3] In respect to their core plot lines, both draw on the tradition of the so-called revisionist Western and accentuate violence and moral ambiguities in the actions and characters of their white, male protagonists (Buel 53-54; Humphreys 210; Triana 2-3, 10-11, 15-16).[4] Completing the plot, however—that is, the so-called story missions—is entirely optional. As so-called open-world videogames, they invite players to stray and explore the gameworld on their own and engage in nu-

2   Throughout this article, *Red Dead Redemption* (published in 2010) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (published in 2018) will be referred to as *RDR* and *RDR2*; *Red Dead Redemption* will refer to the series as such.

3   *RDR* was preceded by the more linear third-person shooter *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), which featured discrete, albeit large, levels rather than an open gameworld. *Red Dead Revolver*, however, was a videogame originally conceived by a different studio and publisher, Angel Studios/ Capcom, which was then completed by Rockstar Games after their parent company Take-Two Interactive had purchased Angel Studios and the rights to their videogames. While Rockstar Games did turn the project into their own, thus founding the larger *Red Dead* franchise, *RDR* was arguably the title that started the series properly since it was developed by Rockstar San Diego from scratch, borrowing heavily from the success formula of Rockstar Games' flagship franchise *Grand Theft Auto*. Due to the different structural design, I therefore do not consider *Red Dead Revolver* as part of the *Red Dead Redemption* series.

4   The so-called revisionist Western is a label applied to a number of films from the 1960s onwards "that took the Western in a different, more violent direction, away from the simplistic frontier morality plays of an earlier age to scenarios that openly attacked the ethos of the mythic West while wrestling with contemporary politics disguised in turn-of-the-century dressings" (Nelson 6). In his introduction to *The Western Reader*, Jim Kitses provides an account of the Western as a continually changing genre that also illuminates the role played by revisionism. For a critical discussion of and important intervention into the discourse on the revisionist Western, see Andrew Patrick Nelson's *Still in the Saddle: The Hollywood Western, 1969-1980*. Esther Wright's dissertation "Rockstar Games and American History" furthermore sheds light on how Rockstar's promotional materials actively supported contextualization of *RDR* within the revisionist Western (91-119).

merous optional activities ranging from bounty hunting to horse breaking and everything in between, most of which draw on easily recognizable Western tropes (Triana 11; cf. Humphreys 201).[5] This essential aspect of experiencing the game-worlds of *Red Dead Redemption* is crucial to understanding the series' relation to the Western and, ultimately, its cultural work.

The premise of this article's argument is that the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames present a new form of the Western, the database Western. As a subgenre of the Western, the database Western, like the traditional and revisionist Westerns,[6] is a genre in its own right. What we find in these videogames is the convergence of two genres, the Western and the database, into one. Though the former is thematic and the latter is formal—one privileges the subject matter and the other privileges the mode of presentation—they both are genres. The Western can take any form just as the database can accommodate any content. While the Western has long been employed as a prime example for the operations of genre, database as not only a technical but also a cultural phenomenon has only begun to receive scholarly attention in the 2000s. Nonetheless, it was soon considered a transformative force that would be central to the production and reception of culture in the twenty-first century. "We are coming to recognize, then, gradually but inevitably," Ed Folsom writes in a *PMLA* article in 2007, "that database is a new genre, the genre of the twenty-first century" (1576).

In the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames, players encounter two Westerns at once: the revisionist Western of the main storylines, which previous scholarship has tended to focus on,[7] and the database Western found in the videogames' formal structure, which has largely been neglected. The database Western, I argue, takes primacy over any other type of Western one may identify in *RDR* or *RDR2* precisely because it constitutes the operational core of the videogames.

In essence, the database Western is the Western reconfigured as a database. This hypothesis is based on an argument proposed by Lev Manovich, one of the earliest theorists of the computational database. In *The Language of New Media*,

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5   For accounts of the central features of the Western and its tropes throughout, which will forever remain hopelessly incomplete, see, for instance, Kitses's "Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western" and Jane Tompkins' *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*.

6   It is useful here to remember that what constitutes either of these genres and which texts belong to them is conditioned, as Jason Mittell convincingly argues, by "discursive practices" as suggested by Michel Foucault (Mittell 8). Mittell elaborates that "Although genres are categories of texts, texts themselves do not determine, contain, or produce their own categorization. Generic categories are intertextual and hence operate more broadly than within the bounded realm of a media text. Even though texts certainly bear marks that are typical of genres, these textual conventions are not what define the genre. Genres exist only through the creation, circulation, and reception of texts within cultural contexts" (7-8).

7   See, for example, Buel; Humphreys; Triana.

Manovich asserts that the database is "the key form of cultural expression" in "the computer age" (218). His definition describes databases as "collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other" and "as collections of items on which the user can perform various operations" (218, 219), insisting that "as a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list" (225). Since the database itself does not order its entries or present them in any kind of fixed sequence, its guiding logic from the user's perspective, according to Manovich, is the logic of selection, which he describes as "the logic of all new media—selection from a menu of choices" (126). These basic characteristics of the database as a symbolic form equally apply to *Red Dead Redemption*'s (re)configuration of the Western, resulting in the new generic formation of the database Western.

Experiencing the Western in these videogames is all about the selection of Western tropes from a range of options, presented in and made available by the gameworld, and performing pertinent actions on them. Whereas previous kinds of Westerns offered their audiences a fixed composition of parts which formed a whole that only worked the way it did because of the specific arrangement—and produced a particular politics based on this—the database Western allows for random access in which each element works on its own but is also rendered optional and potentially dispensable. The database supplies the elements, but it does not order or rank them, which decontextualizes and dehistoricizes the individual elements, foreclosing their historical and, thus, political dimension. The gameworld serves as a spatial interface that allows random access to the contents of the database; navigating the world enables players to interact at will with the tropes included. From this perspective even the main story in each game is nothing but another element in the database which may or may not be selected and thus enacted. The database Western, therefore, supersedes all other kinds of Westerns in the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames. The functioning of the database Western is most visible in *RDR* and *RDR2*'s ambient operations, which are discussed in the next section.

Ambient Operations in *Red Dead Redemption*

A core feature not only of the database Western but of other open-world videogames similar to *Red Dead Redemption* are the ambient operations of the gameworld. What I call ambient operations combines two arguments on videogame operations proposed by Alexander R. Galloway and Ian Bogost. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway introduces the concept of the 'ambience act,' by which he refers to the continuing functioning of the gameworld and its entities when the player does neither act nor pause the game. "Things continue to change

when caught in an ambience act," he writes, "but nothing changes that is of any importance. No stopwatch runs down. No scores are lost. If the passage of time means anything at all, then the game is not in an ambient state. It rains. The sun goes down, then it comes up. Trees stir. These acts are a type of perpetual happening, a living tableau" (10). The ambience act describes these environmental actions in videogames as one holistic phenomenon which is essential to the creation of any gameworld's atmosphere,[8] and the concept has been taken up by other scholars in the same way.[9]

By contrast, Bogost's notion of 'unit operations,' developed as "an approach to criticism for procedural artifacts like videogames" (xv), provides a more granular concept, which serves as a productive complement to Galloway's ambience act. "Unit operations," Bogost writes, "are modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (3). Furthermore, "[u]nit operations are characteristically succinct, discrete, referential, and dynamic. System operations are characteristically protracted, dependent, sequential, and static. In general, unit operations privilege function over context, instances over longevity" (4). When Bogost speaks of "discrete, disconnected actions" and "instances" that produce meaning in that very discretion and succinctness, these are the individual units that constitute the ambience act described by Galloway.

Combining both ideas, my conception of ambient operations zooms in on the particular acts and instances that make up the perceived ambience act and accords them the individual significance demanded by a unit-operational approach. An ambient operation, then, is anything that happens around the player in the gameworld in any one moment of gameplay that is not the center of attention. Any ambient operation is meaningful and significant in its own right and independent of any larger system, such as the game's central plot. For example, particularly in *RDR2*, the player character is occasionally ambushed by one of several gangs marauding through the gameworld. While these gangs do appear in *RDR2*'s main story on occasion, most of them are not essential parts of the plot. Mainly, gang members are stumbled upon by accident while exploring the gameworld, which usually results in a conflict situation that can be resolved in several ways. Occasionally, gang members ambush the protagonist as he is riding through the gameworld. Though

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8   'Atmosphere,' here, is understood in the way conceptualized by Gernot Böhme in *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik.*

9   A recent application of Galloway's concept in its holistic sense, for example, can be found in Felix Zimmermann and Christian Huberts' article "From Walking Simulator to Ambience Action Game: A Philosophical Approach to a Misunderstood Genre," which proceeds from Galloway's ambience act to delineate a conception of the genre of the 'ambience action game' as an alternative to the popular term 'walking simulator.'

the gang sometimes refers to a previous altercation with the protagonist, nothing really motivates the occurrence of this particular encounter in this specific moment on a narrative level; it appears both random and inconsequential. It does not even matter how one resolves the situation since any way the event plays out remains without lasting consequences. The state of the gameworld and the state of the player will be largely the same, apart from minor variations in the possessions or reputation of the player character.

Ambient operations are, by definition, operations of the environment—the background, if you will. This means that they are precisely what the player is not originally concerned with in any given moment of gameplay. The player may be focused on navigating the gamespace, on reaching a particular goal, such as solving a challenge set by the game, or something else; ambient operations are what is happening in the gameworld around the playable character at the same time as the player is doing those other things. This does not mean, however, that players do not engage with these ambient operations. Ambient operations in videogames are significant as producers of meaning precisely because they regularly capture the player's attention and redirect their focus and action. Whereas the 'standard' gameplay activities of navigating the gamespace and completing set objectives often lapse into an instrumental mode of engagement, ambient operations break up this instrumentality, demanding a different, more conscious, kind of attention beyond the instrumental. Once an ambient operation enters the center of attention, it both ceases to be an ambient operation—since it is no longer in the background—and it opens up new avenues for player action. This potentiality of emergent player actions marks an entrance point into the territory of narrative liminality.

From Random Events to a Randomized Genre

In order to illuminate the question of narrative liminality, its importance for the cultural work of *Red Dead Redemption*, and the politics of the database Western, this article focuses on one specific type of ambient operations common in contemporary open-world videogames, especially those by Rockstar Games: random events. These random events are the moment when database, narrative, and play collapse into one, producing a narrative liminality emblematic of the cultural work of the database Western as the Western genre itself is randomized and thus divested of any coherent position within the realm of the social, of history, and of politics.

One example already mentioned is the outlaw ambush, another is the damsel in distress. Players moving through the gameworld in either *RDR* or *RDR2* will occasionally hear the voice of a stranger nearby calling for help, complemented by a blinking icon on the mini map that is part of the graphical user interface,

which alerts the player's attention. Maybe her carriage has broken down, maybe she was robbed—in any case, she needs the protagonist's help and asks to be escorted. From a narrative point of view, nothing about this is motivated by either the plot or the player's actions in the gameworld. The player's reaction, likewise, is largely without major consequences. The protagonist's reputation in the gameworld may be affected slightly, but really it does not matter whether the player plays along or ignores the occurrence.

These random events occur regularly in the gameworlds of *RDR* and *RDR2*, provided that certain parameters are met—for example, they will not occur during one of the videogames' scripted missions. Since players cannot know the underlying algorithms that specify the conditions for when a particular event will be triggered, the events appear to occur randomly at the same time as they never seem out of place; random events always fit in with and organically emerge from the environment. The random event, then, is the epitome of an ambient operation as a part of the ambience act described by Galloway. Random events not only fit in because they appear to emerge from the environment; they, in turn, also contribute to the atmosphere of the gameworld by making the environment appear integrated, active, and responsive. This moment when the random event occurs and captures the player's attention is the juncture at which the database logic underlying the database Western in *Red Dead Redemption* becomes visible and demands action.

The database logic works in two ways here. First, the videogame itself selects, as it were, one event from a set of all possible events. No event is more important than any other, and the occurrence of an event never depends on the occurrence of another before or after it. This part of the database itself is hidden to the player; there is no immediate way of seeing all possible events or even influencing their occurrence. It is confined to the machinic level and operated solely by the program, which chooses based on specific conditions of the gameworld. Yet the player does engage the database logic from the other side. Every time a random event occurs, the player must choose how to act in relation to the event. Ignore it? Engage it? If so, in which way? Follow the suggested script and play along? Simply shoot everyone, thus ending the event? The options are plentiful.

One can dissect this moment even further. In the first instance, it is guided by the logic of selection. The system not only selects an event to occur in the player's environment, the player also selects their action in response to it. No event is more important than the others and no player reaction is more appropriate than any other. Any way in which this moment plays out is as significant and meaningful as any other for two reasons. First, none of it is mandatory. Unlike the story missions in *RDR* and *RDR2*—which, in fact, have to be actively sought out and triggered by the player, yet another instance of a database logic—random events do not need to occur. Most players will never witness all possible random events. The second reason is that the way ambient operations are organically embedded in the gameworld,

in the sense that they always make sense, also entails that any kind of engagement with them also equally makes sense. This is because all options of engagement that the videogame affords are likewise designed in line with the world in which they occur. *RDR* and *RDR2* revolve around outlaws in the Wild West so that the possibilities for interaction with other characters privilege the acts of shooting, capturing, and robbing while providing only limited opportunities for verbal communication. If a damsel in distress calls for the protagonist's help because she is being robbed, it makes just as much sense, in terms of the videogame, to help her by apprehending or killing the bandit as it does to rob her oneself. Each option is afforded by the videogame and its database structure, and each option is similarly significant.

As every option is meaningful on its own rather than as part of a larger whole, however, the whole gets drained of significance. When it does not really matter what comes before or after, which choice is made, and which action taken or not, and when an algorithm randomly stages events in the gameworld, the genre text itself is randomized. But if this is the case, if everything is fluid, how can we even confidently classify the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames as Westerns? Do they not avoid classification? Perhaps not, if we consider how database, narrative, and play interact in these moments. Since the underlying structure of the gameworld follows the principles of the database rather than that of narrative or any other symbolic form, ambient operations like random events are never narratively motivated. And although play affords interactivity, player action has no lasting effects; it does not affect the database or the machinic processes of selection in the long term. While database interacts with the two other forms, it also effectively dominates them as one always returns to the database as the grounding. Thus, any attempt of generic classification must inadvertently return to the items in the database and consider them on their own terms rather than as part of a fixed organizing structure such as a narrative. Yet narrative, however liminal, here shows itself to be important for the database Western despite its subordination to the database.

While there is no apparent cause-and-effect relationship between one random event and another, and on the level perceivable by the player one does not follow the other in any fixed way, this is by no means tantamount to the absence of narrative in the database structure, in random events, or in ambient operations more generally. Any random event itself constitutes a micro narrative consisting of actors, events, an order of those events, and apparent causes and effects that lead to that order. Precisely these micro narratives form the very content of *Red Dead Redemption*'s Western database. Most of the random events and many other ambient operations follow established tropes of the Western genre—the ambush, the damsel in distress, the duel, and so on. The functioning of these tropes as tropes by themselves—rather than as tropes embedded in a single, fixed, and logical sequence of events—is crucial here.

Drawing on "Matthew Thomas Payne's work on post-9/11 military games," Soraya Murray contends that "all games are cultural palimpsests" (61, 60). Both Payne and Murray highlight the ways in which videogame representations always contain previous cultural writings and, hence, meanings which may not be visibly apparent even as they fundamentally undergird and structure the experience of playing a particular videogame. The figure of the palimpsest, which refers to a manuscript page that is reused after the original writing has been erased, draws attention to the residues of earlier cultural expressions that remain as new ones are written over them. These residues are central to the database Western and the question of narrative liminality in *Red Dead Redemption*.

If one examines closely the Western tropes included in *Red Dead Redemption*'s Western database, it becomes apparent that they are, in fact, truncated versions of Western tropes. Consider the example of the duel, which is a recurring event particularly in *RDR*. The duel, signifying the violence and self-administered justice of the mythic American West, has become such an iconic set piece of the Western genre that it is immediately recognized as something simply belonging to the world of the Western. It is, therefore, easy to overlook that the Western's duels have always been embedded in logical, causal chains of events. Owen Wister's *Virginian* has to fight Trampas because of the latter's escalating frustration and hate in the wake of years of being outplayed by the former; McKay has to face Buck in *The Big Country* because an ongoing feud escalates over a woman desired by both men; and *Once Upon a Time in the West*'s Harmonica confronts Frank over his many crimes, including the murder of Harmonica's brother. All of these examples show how the duel in the Western is usually the culmination of a longer line of causally connected events.

A few scripted exceptions notwithstanding, the duels in the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames appear disconnected from such cause-and-effect narratives. Rather, opponents somewhat randomly confront the protagonist for no apparent reason, upon which the player may accept or decline the duel.[10] If accepted, it turns into a ludic challenge requiring the player's quick reaction and precision in taking out the contender before the protagonist himself is shot. Though immediately understood as a ludic challenge, the duel, due to its randomness, makes little sense from a narrative point of view. Unlike the iconic duels mentioned above, nothing builds up to those in *Red Dead Redemption*; they simply happen. The videogames present the duels but they do not offer explanations for them. Still the duels do not seem odd or out of place; they firmly fit in and belong to the Wild West world of *Red Dead Redemption* and are likely immediately understood by players. These are the residues,

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10   One notable exception is the duel that ensues when the player cheats during a game of poker in the gameworld, which is also the only way for them to actively seek out a duel themselves.

as it were, on the palimpsest of the Western in *Red Dead Redemption*, and these narrative residues continuously ground the database Western within the larger generic formation of the Western and make it readable as such.

Returning to the question of narrative liminality, the important point here is the moment in which database, narrative, and play converge in the same instance of gameplay when a random event occurs. It seems helpful at this point to briefly recall Galloway's notion of videogames as "an *action-based* medium" (3; emphasis in the original). According to him, "[w]ith video games, the work itself is material action. One *plays* a game. And the software *runs*. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move. Here the 'work' is not as solid or integral as in other media" (2; emphasis in the original). In Galloway's account, action is what ensures videogames' existence beyond lines of code (Galloway 2) and data stored in "carrier media" (Starre). In the *Red Dead Redemption* series and similar videogames, this logic of action is accompanied by one of selection akin to that described by Manovich. One could say that these videogames are marked by logic of 'selaction'—a hybrid form of 'selection' and 'action' in which one works coterminously with the other. In such works, the user (here: the player) selects through acting, acts by selecting, selects in order to act, and acts in order to select; and not just the user, the machine, too, is involved in similar ways as random events from the database are selected by executing the game's code.

The logic of selaction, in fact, constitutes the act of (game)play. In *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (304). Understanding gameplay in this way illuminates how database, narrative, and play interact in *Red Dead Redemption*'s ambient operations. The videogames' databases of western tropes, interfaced by the gameworlds, provide an expressive structure that is rigid because it is finite—there are only so many tropes making up the database, and they are these tropes and not others. The micro narrative of the ambient operation—a gang of outlaws ambushes the protagonist, a damsel in distress calls for help, a stranger demands a duel—likewise provides a rigid structure, albeit a narrative rather than operational one, as they are scripted in particular, invariable ways. The "free movement" highlighted by Salen and Zimmerman emerges once the player acts in response to the event: Do they play along with an established, generic script, do they undermine it, or do they ignore it altogether? Do they kill and rob the damsel in distress instead of rescuing her and escorting her to safety? Do they confront the outlaws in a shootout or do they run away? Do they accept the duel or decline it, thus unsettling the teleological logic of the trope?

Narrative Liminality and the Cultural Work of the Database Western

Inherently narrative as these moments are, their narrativity proves to be liminal here because narrative does not order the unfolding events. They are structured in the symbolic form of the database, their meanings are framed by narrative, but the sequence of actions belongs to the realm of play. While the formulaic nature of the narrative elements of *Red Dead Redemption* should provide a sense of not only predictability but also stability, both the database structure and the factor of (game)play produce a level of uncertainty typical for videogames but atypical for the Western. To return to a point raised earlier, Westerns generally work through their fixed composition, with each element fulfilling a specific function in relation to all the other elements. Videogames, on the other hand, often lack this degree of certainty. Marie-Laure Ryan points out that "[i]nsofar as they are based on a simulation engine, they generate a different storyworld every time they are played" (41). The logic described by Ryan is escalated in *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western since not only the player's actions produce "a different storyworld every time" but also the machine's acts of selection which conjure the ambient operations experienced by the player in any given moment. "Uncertainty, in fact," writes Greg Costikyan, "is a primary characteristic of all sorts of play, and not of games alone" (9). This uncertainty of play, as a logic, conflicts with the narrative certainty typically required by the Western genre.

The uncertainty that emerges from the area of narrative liminality in *Red Dead Redemption*'s ambient operations shapes the cultural work of the database Western. Traditionally, the Western has been a genre that relies on resolution in one way or another. Whether affirmative of American myths, like the classic Western, or corrective of them, like the revisionist Western, the genre has generally been marked by value systems that are reliable within any single work and by rigid narrative structures that provide orientation for the audience. As Jim Kitses writes about the conventions of the Western, "[w]hat holds all of these elements together (and in that sense provides the basic convention) is narrative and dramatic structure" ("Authorship" 68). Since database and play prevail over narrative in *Red Dead Redemption*, narrative cannot provide order. In the words of John Wills, "[t]he omnipotent power of the Westerly dream was thus, if not totally rejected, at the very least questioned and prodded, with American history left intriguingly open and malleable to new interpretation" (82). The crucial point in this is precisely that interpretation is left open and that no political stance is taken.

The narrative liminality and uncertainty of the database Western in *Red Dead Redemption* effectively produces a draining of politics that ultimately reveals the series' own politics, which are cynical and evasive at best—a politics of withdrawal. The consequence of the design and functioning of the database Western is a cultural text that attempts to evade politics in a context that is deeply and historically

political. The *Red Dead Redemption* videogames reconfigure the Western genre in that they isolate and formalize generic tropes in a database to make them available for random access. This process not only decontextualizes these elements, it also severs them from their history, despite the fact that "the western is American history" (Kitses, "Authorship" 57). If narrative is relegated to a liminal status, then history is, too. Even *RDR2*'s occasional attempts to tackle white supremacy and racism, particularly in its depiction of the American postbellum South (Jones), ultimately remain optional, isolated events, items accorded the same significance as any other. In *Red Dead Redemption*'s database Western, with the exception of the main plot, there is no before or after to which any item in the database is tied; they exist and function for their own sake and are easily ignored or discarded. This amounts to nothing less than the ill-fated attempt to shake off the ideological baggage of a contested genre by reorganizing it formally, thus producing a pseudo-apolitical entertainment experience of an ostensibly neutral, simulated American West to play with. The emphasis on freedom of action and player choice—in the sense that this Western will be the Western any individual player wants it to be—is in line with the rhetoric of individual responsibility and agency that has characterized neoliberal societies in both their theoretical promise and practical illusion for decades.

Conclusion

As they isolate, decontextualize, and formalize familiar Western tropes in the form of a database that makes them available for random access, the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames exemplify the new genre of the database Western. While the genre is marked by an interplay of the three symbolic forms of database, narrative, and play, database and its logic of selection take command, which leads to a state of narrative liminality that deprives the Western of its historical dimension. Since this dimension has previously endowed the Western genre with its political meaning, relegating narrative (and, thus, history) to the realm of the liminal is at odds with the Western's significance for American culture. By turning the American West into a virtual entertainment experience that renders all elements equal and potentially discardable, the *Red Dead Redemption* videogames effectively disavow politics altogether. The database Western's cultural work, then, ultimately amounts to a withdrawal from history.

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