

Spatial Juxtapositions as a Narrative Device in *Red Dead*

*Redemption.*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the ways in which constructed space in video games serves a narrative function and to study the rhetorical spatial techniques used by game designers used to influence player experience. Specifically, this paper focuses on the use of spatial juxtapositions in the game *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) to advance core thematic and emotional plot elements and how the narrative of this game is coded into the game's space itself through a series of contrasted spatial states. This thesis will establish these core thematic components as central to the traditional western genre and situate *Red Dead Redemption* within the gamic genre of the Western. It will explore how standard industrial tropes of video game spatial construction all articulate these components. Finally the paper will argue that spatial construction and function is an inherent aspect of how video game genres are delineated and discuss how *Red Dead Redemption's* use of space conforms to or breaks with player's generic expectations of spatial construction. In conclusion, the thesis will broaden the scope of its argument and identify new directions for understanding the use of spatial juxtapositions in video games for a narrative purpose.

## Introduction

In his seminal book on video games, Mark Wolf writes that in video games there exists “an importance to space that is unlike that of other media...the individual game’s worldview also determines how the game’s diegetic world is constructed and represented on screen and what it means” (51). To be sure, space is among the most important aspects of all video games, as integral to the medium as sentences are to literature or frames are to film. Wolf’s claim that a game’s worldview determines what is represented on the screen and how it is represented, however, has more far reaching implications. Video game space in this sense is not merely the stage on which the player performs, but is intricately tied to narrative function of the game and becomes a core component of the how games relay their themes and ideas.

In their study on the game design of Insomniac Games’ action platformer, *Spyro the Dragon* (2000), Stitt and Fioritto state that the development crew behind *Spyro* used spatial signifiers as narrative cues to the player:

To indicate that a player was making progress in a level, we tried visually to emphasize the transition between specific areas... These transitions would often occur after passing through a narrow corridor or completing a long glide, and they served as memorable focal points in a level” (unpaginated).

This notion of space is similar to, but distinctly different from, Celia Pearce’s

characterization of the player's house, called a Relto, in *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (2003), as "a means of tracking progress in the game" (6).

Pearce writes:

As players traverse each Age, they collect various items that add features to the Relto...Thus, [an] experienced player, deeply familiar with the 'language' of the game, was able to quickly assess, based on the features in my Relto, which Ages I had access to and where I had been in each (7).

More importantly (although not explicitly stated by Pearce), the Relto enabled a literate player to instruct Pearce where to go next; its space conveyed the next episode of the narrative.

Though both Pearce's characterization of the use of space in *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* and Stitt and Fioritto's characterization of it in *Spyro the Dragon* serve the same purpose of demonstrating narrative progression, the key difference in *Spyro the Dragon* is that the developers code the construction of the game space not as a practical, instructive means of indicating where a player ought to go, but as an emotionally evocative element of the game to be consumed. Thus, not only is space is a mere utility in video games, but concrete elements of the game space also function as a means of eliciting emotion from the player.

Key to both these uses of space is that neither instance conveys progress in and of itself. Instead it is the juxtaposition of disparate spatial elements that creates

this effect. In the case of *Spyro*, this juxtaposition is between the narrow corridor and the presumably wider spaces that precede and follow it. Whereas the juxtaposition in *Spyro* is moment to moment, defined by the recurrence of narrow passages, that in *Uru* encompasses the entire game sequence. Pearce prefaces her discussion of the Relto with a before and after picture of the Relto at the beginning and the end of the game. Thus to Pearce, at least implicitly, the means of eliciting a sense of progress lies in contrasting states of space. In his essay on video game space and narrative, Henry Jenkins echoes this point: "Players...can return to a familiar space later in the game and find that it has been transformed by subsequent, off screen events" (127).

I would suggest that such juxtaposition of disparate spatial elements serves a major narrative function in video games, as a means by which game developers structure spatial events in a way that articulates complex themes and emotions. As players move through the game space, the past spaces they have visited inform their expectations of what the current space they find themselves in will be like. In this way, a game invites the player to contrast space between different areas of the game, or even the same space at different periods in the game's narrative. Spatial juxtaposition is the player's implicit contrast of the connotations of two readily demarcated areas of the game world by way of a pair of spatial opposites, one from each area. Areas are demarcated either explicitly, by giving them different names and drawing boundaries between them on a map, or implicitly, by assigning different objects to each, making them different colors, or giving them different lighting. Juxtaposition can occur either between two distinct regions of the game

world, or between the same region of space at two distinct times. Pairs of spatial opposites include, for instance, hills and valleys, open plain and narrow corridors. Spatial juxtaposition is not just limited to spatial features of the landscape, however; it can also occur between two opposing modes of player interaction with the game space. Key to this definition is that spatial juxtaposition is not working in isolation; there is no permanent, inherent meaning to a mountain or a valley. Instead, the game draws upon previously existing connotations assigned to areas in the game world. Such connotations are established either diegetically through dialogue or music, or extra-diegetically by cultural notions surrounding a game's historical or geographic setting.

In this essay, I will draw upon contrasts between demarcated spaces in Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) as a prime example of spatial juxtaposition used to support an elaborate narrative and thematic tapestry. *Red Dead Redemption* goes beyond the simple uses of space found in *Spyro the Dragon* or *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, instead presenting a series of spatial contrasts that have the net effect of evoking complex cultural notions and supporting overarching narrative themes.

*Red Dead Redemption*, a Western themed game set in 1911, follows John Marston, a former outlaw gone clean, who is forced by the newly emergent FBI to track down his former partners in exchange for a pardon. Each of John Marston's targets can be found in one distinct, explicitly demarcated region of the map, and it is both between and within these regions that spatial juxtapositions serve a narrative purpose. The space in *Red Dead Redemption* communicates first the

western mythos and the paradigm of western expansion with a clear demarcation between what is safe, home and East and what is dangerous, wild and untamed West. The game proceeds to deconstruct this dichotomy, introducing confusion in the division between the civilized and those uprooting civilization. Finally, the game confines the final moments to small-scale, somewhat trivial movements and rote, slow-moving plot events. The net effect is to communicate, using spatial juxtapositions, the death of the west, by contrasting the great expanse of western space, with a small area of civilization, where the prototypical American gunslinger is reduced to menial tasks and minor confrontations.

### ***Red Dead Redemption in the Western Tradition***

Since spatial juxtaposition must necessarily rearticulate existing connotations of space, before discussing the specific instances of spatial juxtaposition, it is necessary to first establish the cultural context of the connotations that these instances come to convey. As a western, many of connotations that surround the regions of *Red Dead Redemption* are already established through generic conventions. The Western genre has a long history in video games, dating back to among the first games ever featured in arcades. The Western traditions in film and literature that these games borrow from have an even longer and richer cultural history and are ripe with cultural meanings central to the American identity.

Westerns saw an early rise to prominence amongst arcade and early computer games, with titles such as *Badlands* (1984), *Bank Panic* (1984), and

*Cheyenne* (1984) becoming electronic versions of the classic shooting gallery. Since iconography is the most easily translated aspect of genre, and so it is not surprising that early Western video games relied heavily on Western iconography as their signature claim to the title of Western. Most of these games used Western iconography as a selling point without situating the games historically or creating overarching narratives. Moreover, the Western elements were largely a result of (and a way of getting around) the limited means of establishing a narrative in the arcade setting. Viewers familiar with Western film genres would immediately know, for instance, in *Bank Panic*, that the men with bandannas over their mouths were the ones to shoot, while those without masks, who were customers, the player would be penalized for shooting.

Many of the early Western video games saw a considerable degree of hybridization with other genre elements. *Custer's Revenge* (1982) is, at its core, a fairly simplistic game even for the time. It required the player to dodge obstacles while going from one end of the map to the other. The reason for its considerable financial success and fame was not its game play, but its controversy both in showing simulated rape and in situating this rape in the historical context of the rape of American Indian women by American settlers. The pornography and Western setting are, just as in the arcades, a selling point as well as a means through which to compensate for the game's lack of diegetic narration. The hybridization of the Western and erotic genres in *Custer's Revenge* was indicative of a future trend: *Badlands* and *Blood* (1997) both involve Western gunfighters transported across

time to fight enemies varying from demons to dinosaurs, while *Silverload* (1996) and *Darkwatch* (2005) blended the Western with Horror elements.

On consoles as well, many Japanese-made games continued to incorporate Western iconography while ignoring the syntactic aspects of the Western filmic genre. These “Samurai Westerns,” a category that includes the game of the same name and also games such as the *Wild Arms* series and *Trigun* series, are complicated within the Western tradition, because although they traffic in Western iconography, they do not take place in the American West. Their hybrid status within the Western and Samurai genre traditions confuses them further. Within this tradition, characters are as equally likely to carry a sword as a six shooter. Though many of the Western elements—trains, bandits, duster coats and sheriffs—all dominate the barren, dust-filled landscape, there is decidedly no frontier. Specifically, most of these games take place in fictionalized post apocalyptic wastelands where there is no East, just a permanent, inescapable West.

These hybrid Westerns were using “evocative spaces...not so much [to] tell self contained stories as [to] draw upon our previously existing narrative competencies. They can paint their worlds in fairly broad outlines and count on the visitor/player to do the rest” (Jenkins 123). In Altman’s terms, we can say that such games conform to the semantics of the filmic Western, with its “common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like” (10), without making any attempt to reproduce the narrative “structures into which they are arranged” (10) that expressed, “the dialectic between the West as a garden and as a desert, [and]



between culture and nature, community and the individual, the future and the past” (Altman 10-11).

Thus, Western video games have a long history of paying homage to the film genre in terms of iconography without situating themselves within a specific historical reality or entertaining in any fashion the myth of the frontier. While some, such as *The Oregon Trail* (1971) could be said to be challenging a romanticized vision of Manifest Destiny through the random nature of occurrences, for the most part the vast majority of Western-oriented games have engaged semantically, rather than syntactically, with the filmic genre of the Western. According to Altman, new genres arise when “either a relatively stable set of semantic givens is developed through syntactic experimentation into a coherent and durable syntax, or an already existing syntax adopts a new set of semantic elements” (12). Since it is clear that generic video game semantics predated any given syntax and, moreover, that these semantic elements were longstanding within the realm of filmic Western tradition, the former option is more realistic.

Tellingly, *Red Dead Redemption* came out only three years after another open world Western, *Call of Juarez* (2006), and five years after another *Gun* (2005), which was among the first real attempts to create a Western “world” as opposed to a broken series of Western-themed conflicts, as in the case of *Gunfighter* (2001) and *Red Dead Revolver* (2004), *Red Dead Redemption*’s spiritual predecessor. The change that these games represent in the gamic Western tradition can probably be best expressed in their emphasis on the environment and terrain as opposed to the characters and props. Traditionally, Western video games lent most of their

graphical emphasis to the semantic elements of the Western: stock characters, such as the sheriff, the outlaw, the drunk, and the whore or props, such as guns, cowboy hats and cacti. Many of these games, such as *Dust: A Tale of the Wired West* (1995), *Mad Dog McCree*, (1990), and *Silverload* (1996), used photographs and live action actors to represent characters, but often there was a disparity between the graphical quality of the characters and that of the landscape (see fig 1).



Figure1: Graphical disparities and centrality of character in *Dust: A Tale of the Wired West*  
Image by Gordon Aplin, Screenshot; Metzomagic Reviews, April 2002; Web;  
<http://www.metzomagic.com/showArticle.php?index=442>

Even when the world was all live action, the players' movement was necessarily extremely limited, denying them a sense of the game space by the fact that they were passive observers of it. Additionally, the interactivity of the actors, who would react to players' shots, was not equal to the interactivity of the environment, which did not respond to players' gunshots.

By contrast, *Red Dead Redemption*, *Gun*, and *Call of Juarez* all emphasized the environment of the West through their open world format, as well as through their state of the art graphics. Tellingly, all of these games have graphical similarities,

reminiscent of the nineteenth century luminist movement (see fig 2), marked by “cool, hard palpable light (not diffuse), spread across a glassy surface” (Bukatman 98).



Figure 2: Similarities in style between *Gun* (2005) (top left) “Paradise Rocks, Newport” (1860) by James Suydam (top right), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) (bottom left), and *Call of Juarez* (2007) (bottom right)

Top Right: Image by Anonymous. Screenshot; Gaming Update, August 15, 2008; <http://www.gamingupdate.com>; Web. Top Left: Suydam, James. *Paradise Rocks, Newport*. 1860. Art Experts; <http://www.artexpertswebsite.com>, 1 January 2010; Web. Bottom left: Image by Ikkie14. Screenshot; Red Dead Wiki; <http://redddead.wikia.com>, May 23, 2010; Web. Bottom right: Image by Anonymous. Screenshot; VideoGamer; <http://www.videogamer.com>, April 19, 2007; Web.

The purpose and effect of such paintings, according to Bukatman, was “evoking the sublimity of the American landscape” (Bukatman 98). By following in this tradition, *Gun*, *Call of Juarez*, and *Red Dead Redemption* all emphasize the infinite nature and centrality of the American landscape to American cultural identity.

*Red Dead Redemption* was made during a period of renewed interest in recreating the American West digitally in a way that emphasized construction of space over Western iconography. These games were among the first western video games to function both semantically and syntactically at a time when semantic

experimentation was first giving birth to a gamic Western syntax. In *Red Dead Redemption*, this syntax is expressed primarily through spatial juxtaposition that evokes the “border between two lands, between two eras...between two value systems” (Altman 11) that is the central fixture of the Western tradition.

The fault line for this binary dualism in the Western is the historic boundary of the frontier. In the context of the Western genre, what the frontier came to mean is probably more important than the literal series of geographic boundaries of the United States. The notion of the frontier as a fundamental underpinning of the American cultural psyche dates back to Frederick Turner’s 1893 claim in his “The Frontier in American History” that “Each frontier has made similar contributions to the American character” (Turner unpaginated). These contributions, namely, according to Turner, were hone a new American identity that was a departure from European culture. The new, emergent American identity was one based on the ownership of land, free for the taking by those who could tame the savage Western landscape, which ensured self-sufficiency and democratic equality. Turner goes on to posit that the psychology of Americans has always been inexorably linked to the land they inhabit and that the closing the western frontier has placed Americans for whom it was a core component of their national identity into a cultural crisis.

In his book *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin states:

The history of movie genre is the story of the conception, elaboration and acceptance of a special kind of space...Genre space is also mythic space: a pseudo-historical (or pseudo-real) setting that is powerfully

associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture's myth/ideological tradition...for American audiences, [other genres] do not compare in density, currency or ideological presence to those associated with the myth of the frontier (233-34).

Thus the frontier mythos, namely, according to Turner, the notion that Americans are a reflection of their environment and vice versa, is a fundamental underpinning of the Western genre in literature and film. It should not be surprising then, to find that in video games too, the representation of the land is a necessary reflection of its inhabitants, and vice versa. The representation of space in *Red Dead Redemption* becomes a living metaphor for John Marston himself and the status of the ideals and values that he stands for. As Jenkins argues, a video game, like a soap opera, "depends on the external projection of internal states" (127). Thus, space in *Red Dead Redemption* becomes a barometer for John Marston's relationship with the Western mythos and cowboy icon with which he is aligned. In this sense, John Marston lives and dies with the West, and the game uses discrete series of spatial juxtapositions to communicate to the player a narrative of loss of agency and authority that follows the end of the frontier.

### ***Red Dead Redemption and the Cowboy Hero***

The agency and authority that John Marston loses following the death of the frontier is indicative of his status as a prototypical "cowboy figure." The cowboy hero is an iconic figure central to the Western tradition that occupies a unique place

in America's political and cultural fabric. In her essay on "Eternal Inequality," Sara Humphreys characterizes "cowboy figure" that she claims John Marston represents, as a hero whose status as a

Rugged individual [who] comprises a paradoxical combination of atavistic coarseness and violence with preternatural abilities to navigate and benefit from the neoliberalism that is euphemistically described in frontier narratives as progress and freedom (200).

Humphreys bases her argument on cultural historian Lee Clark Mitchell's claim that the notion of the fantastical west and the abundant frontier were integral in shaping modern American constructions of masculinity based on economic self sustenance and financial independence. Humphreys argues that in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, Mitchell's concept of American masculinity is fundamentally threatened. For this reason, films and video games in the western genre have seen a resurgence as viewers and players attempt to reaffirm their own sense of masculinity by placing themselves in the shoes of prototypical western heroes.

According to Humphreys, this hero of the western tradition is a "cowboy, who must be individualistic, but also conformist" (Humphreys 203) and "must, if necessary, violently defend the edicts of neoliberalism" (Humphreys 206). neoliberalism, defined broadly, is the belief that economic inequality is an unavoidable product of the unregulated economy driven by spirited individuals working for their own benefit. Moreover, neoliberalism asserts that the downsides

of such an economy are greatly outweighed by the downsides of a more strictly regulated economy or an economy based on the collected efforts of coordinate groups. In keeping with this philosophy, the neoliberal hero, according to Humphreys, stoically accepts economic inequality and endures economic hardship without relying on others or demanding what he has not worked for. In addition, this hero, embodied in the figure of the American cowboy, stalwartly opposes the overreach of government authority figures as well as those who seek to upend the social order by illicit means. According to Humphreys, the cowboy hero and neoliberal philosophy are inextricably tied to notions of white, heteronormative masculinity in American culture.

That John Marston embodies a neoliberalist paragon is necessarily problematized by Marston's own assertion that he is a socialist "in a sense," (Civilization, at Any Cost) and that he still believes that his mantra from his outlaw days of "taking from those who had too much and giving to those that had too little" was morally right. In addition, Humphrey's larger claim that: "RDR operates successfully as a type of twentieth century safety valve that relieves the pressures of a failed neoliberal economy because the participatory nature of video games offer epistemic and ontological stability" (206) ignores the ways in which the game consistently emasculates or otherwise renders John Marston, and by extension, the player, impotent within its narrative (see note 1). Also problematizing this vision of John Marston as an unfettered masculine hero is the fact that he doesn't want to be one. Rather, he, like Shane in *Shane* (1953), aspires to patriarchal authority over a nuclear family that necessitates "the institutional structure that tries to constrain

human passions and desires” (McGee 6). Like Shane, Marston, by means of his exile, becomes the “nomad [who] desires that which he is not, but the condition of that desire is the distance from the identity” (McGee 7). John Marston repeatedly states that he wants only to be a farmer and a father to his son. That upon attaining stewardship over a nuclear family, John dies protecting it, marks the final fulfillment of his principal mission—his transformation from a nomad with no history into a patriarchal protector. Thus, John Marston as a character is hard to see as an entirely neoliberal hero, much less a platform for a player’s delusions of self-empowered sufficiency. The game’s neoliberalist bent comes less from Marston’s function within it as a character, and more from the game’s persistent vision of an essential conflict between inescapably corrupt authority figures and their self-sufficient subjects.

While the game pays nostalgic tribute to a socialist belief in Marston’s past, it also paints this belief as untenable by showing how leaders claiming to represent the people, such as Dutch and Reyes, end up ultimately undermining the freedoms they claimed to represent. Curiously, *Red Dead Redemption* is unlike other westerns, such as *Deadwood* (2004), which demonstrate that characters “who exist in a free market environment, unregulated by state controls and genteel codes of behavior...have the potential to form strategic alliances that break the very logic of the free market from within” (Borden 235). Thus, the game itself portrays a socialist belief in revolutionary leaders as sympathetic but misguided, but side steps any notion that neoliberal belief may be similarly impossible to maintain in actuality.

Thus, the game can be said to be advocating neoliberal policy while still holding a nostalgic reverence for a more radical position that crumbles when



achieved in actuality. By locating socialist belief in Marston's past, *Red Dead Redemption*, rather than opposing socialist belief, safely stores it in a time that becomes distinctly unattainable by way of the nostalgia that surrounds it. Thus, the game itself, while falling short of a regressive fantasy of self-sufficient masculinity that Humphreys posits, still upholds a worldview that presents neoliberalism as the best and most practical political philosophy through conflicts between authority figures and a cowboy individualist. The battle between rugged individualists and sinister government bureaucrats that is at the core of both *Red Dead Redemption's* narrative and neoliberal philosophy is also one that is central to Western mythology and is fundamentally ingrained in the American cultural conception of the historic West.

### **Narrative Use of Space in *Red Dead Redemption***



Figure 3: The three regions of *Red Dead Redemption*

Image by Artur "Arxel" Justynski. 2010. Game Pressure Guides.

<http://guides.gamepressure.com/reddeadrredemption/guide.asp?ID=9612>

*Red Dead Redemption* expresses the cultural and historic concept of the frontier, along with the iconic figure and ideology it gave birth to, through spatial juxtaposition. *Red Dead Redemption's* game space, (see fig 3), is divided into three distinct regions, New Austin, Nuevo Paraiso, and the West Elizabeth region. The spatial features and interactions of each of these regions are structured so that they come to represent a coherent aspect of Western mythology through their opposition to the connotations of the other regions. Within these regions as well, there are implicitly demarcated areas that take on additional meaning through the contrast of their spatial elements with adjacent areas. These contrasts inform the overall connotation of a region, and the contrasts of regional connotation through that of their spatial features and interactions, forms the basis of *Red Dead Redemption's* narrative.

The names of these three regions are indicative of the cultures and ideologies they are meant to represent. New Austin evokes first the new, the open and the frontier, while Austin evokes the imagery of central Texas and the classic West. West Elizabeth evokes Elizabethan England, a period that has become almost synonymous with Shakespeare and the high European culture that, according to Turner "the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from" (Turner unpaginated). The West that precedes Elizabeth is a mark of the curious hybridization and continual conflict between eastern and western elements during the third act of *Red Dead Redemption*. Ultimately, though, in West Elizabeth, the encroaching influence of European culture and technologically modern civilization, supplants the Western tradition, more than Western society barbarizes a Eurocentric society. In this way, these

two distinctly demarcated spaces, in their names alone, are set to be contrasted, inviting the player to read them and everything they contain in light of a central conflict between East and West.

The identities of these three regions as conveyed through their names and geographic locations are further established and explored further through spatial juxtaposition. The game establishes New Austin, the first of the three regions, as the embodiment of the traditional west through the notion of the frontier as defined by Turner: “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Turner unpaginated). The game articulates this central notion through a key spatial juxtaposition within two distinct halves of New Austin, demarcated by the objects found in each. The meeting point of these two halves is an enormous cliff face over which the player crosses early in the game (see fig 5).



Figure 5: The cliff face that marks *Red Dead Redemption's* division between east and west. Image by author. April 26, 2014. Screenshot.

This seemingly insurmountable cliff face marks a major change in terrain for the player. East of it, natural grass grows and trees can be seen everywhere. West of

it, there is only barren rock and earth with only the cactus and dried shrub for foliage. Using these contrasting objects, the game demarcates these two regions of the game implicitly.

More importantly, standing on the edge of this cliff face, facing west, the player is able to see onward to the distant horizon, evoking the promise and great expanse of the West at the point of the frontier. Facing east the player sees only a great wall, aligning civilization with a stagnant impasse. Thus, in the first act, the space of the game communicates a frontier ethos of westward expansion through the contrast of a mythical, savage, and untamed western stage for masculine conquest and dominion with a civilized, domestic, eastern space that is distinctly feminine (see note 2).

The shape and scope of these three regions further convey this regional identity. New Austin is much “longer” than West Elizabeth, meaning that it has a much greater east to west expanse of space than West Elizabeth. Whereas New Austin is distinctly rectangular, perhaps even rhomboid, in shape, West Elizabeth is much more square in shape. Thus, in New Austin, there is much more room for westward movement, whereas in the final portion of the game, the player is almost as likely to move north and south as east and west. Add to this that most of the missions in West Elizabeth are contained within the eastern lateral half, and East and West matter even less in *Red Dead Redemption's* last chapter. In this way, the game uses the pronounced east-west expanse of New Austin to evoke the frontier narrative through its contrast with West Elizabeth, which embodies the civilized and confined east. That the West Elizabeth is much smaller than New Austin only adds to

the feeling of gradual confinement and loss of freedom to roam that comes with high density urban population. This gradual collapsing of the frontier is not only conveyed through the potential space that the player can move within, but also through the actual distances and directions (s)he is called to travel throughout the course of the game.

In the first act, the missions take place in the form of a gradual westward expansion. The player begins on the eastern edge of New Elizabeth and is called upon to go to objectives that are increasingly and consistently to the west. In general, the each missions begins west of the end point of the one that proceeded it. (see fig 4).

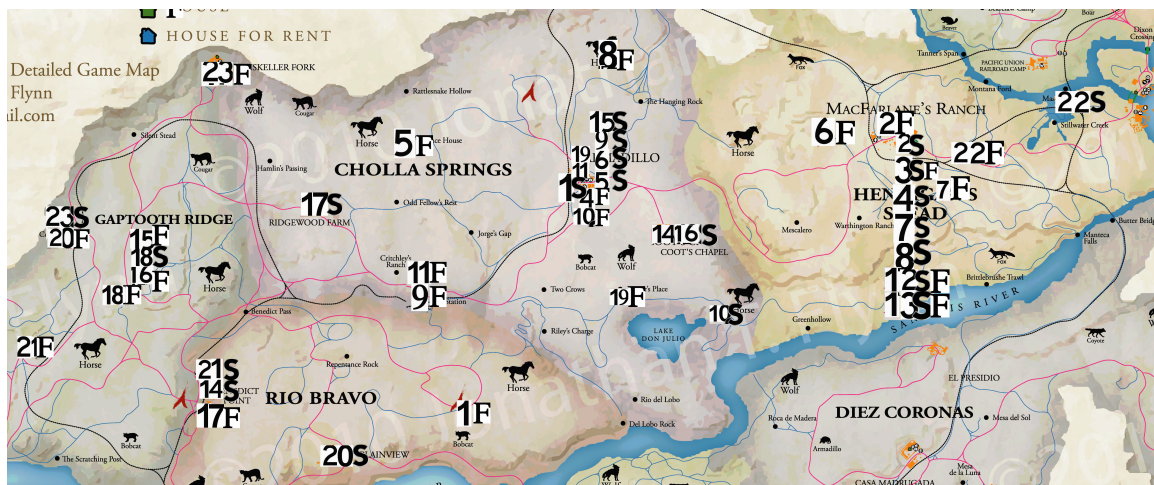


Figure 4: Missions are numbered consecutively from 1 to 23 of the first chapter. S to the right of the number indicates the starting point of a mission, F indicates the finishing point. A number with SF indicates that the mission ends the same place it began. Missions 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 12, and 13 all begin in the same place. Mission's 5, 6, 9, and 15 also share a starting point. For mission list, see note 4. Original image by Jonathan T. Flynn; Red Dead Wiki; <http://reddead.wikia.com>; June 23, 2013; Web. Mission locations added by author, April 26, 2014.

Apart from the first mission, which takes place farther west in order to introduce the main antagonist, most missions begin either in the same place or westward of the one that proceeded it and nearly all of them end farther west than they had begun.

In the game's second act, by contrast, most of the missions that begin in the western quarter of the map end in the east and most of the missions that begin in the east end in the west. Furthermore, the next mission is almost always on the other side of the map from the end of the last one, forcing the player to travel back and forth constantly across the span of the entire map both between and during missions (see fig 6).





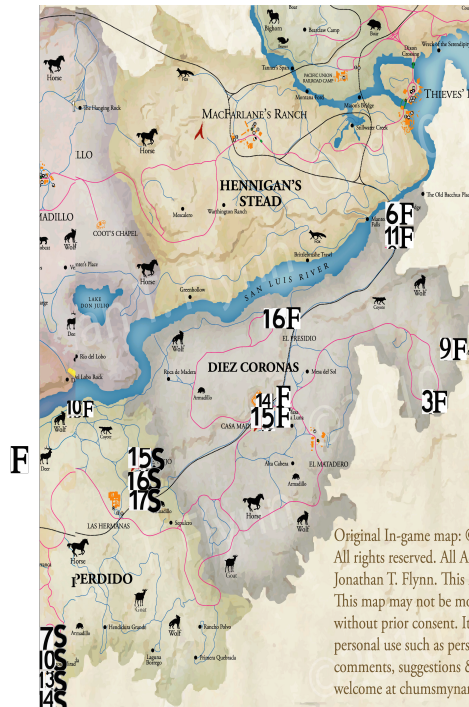


Figure 6: Back and forth motion in Nuevo Paraiso's missions. Split in half for readability. Top is left half, bottom right half.

Original image by Jonathan T. Flynn. June 23, 2013. Red Dead Wiki. Web. Original image by Jonathan T. Flynn; Red Dead Wiki; <http://reddead.wikia.com>; June 23, 2013; Web. Mission locations added by author, April 26, 2014.

In the second act, Marston works alternatively for the Mexican government to crush a peasant rebellion and for the rebels in overthrowing the government. Like Clint Eastwood's Joe in *A Fistful of Dollars*, John Marston changes allegiances between two warring factions, making both believe he is loyal to them. The missions in the second act consistently take place on the opposite side of the map as the one that preceded it. There is a tremendous amount of backtracking, with the player revisiting the same territory during and between each mission. This gives the player a sense of going back and forth from one side to the other, articulating John Marston's oscillating loyalties through the space the player moves. The constant travel from one side of the map to the other also communicates John Marston's

feeling that both sides are leading him on and drawing him in circles and that his greater mission to track down an outlaw and thus rescue his family is getting sidetracked.

The majority of the missions in the third act of *Red Dead Redemption* are cyclical; they begin in the same place they end, in contrast to past missions, which always left Marston far from where he began (see fig 7). This combined with the considerably smaller distances over which the player travels in these missions leads to a sense of confinement and immobility.

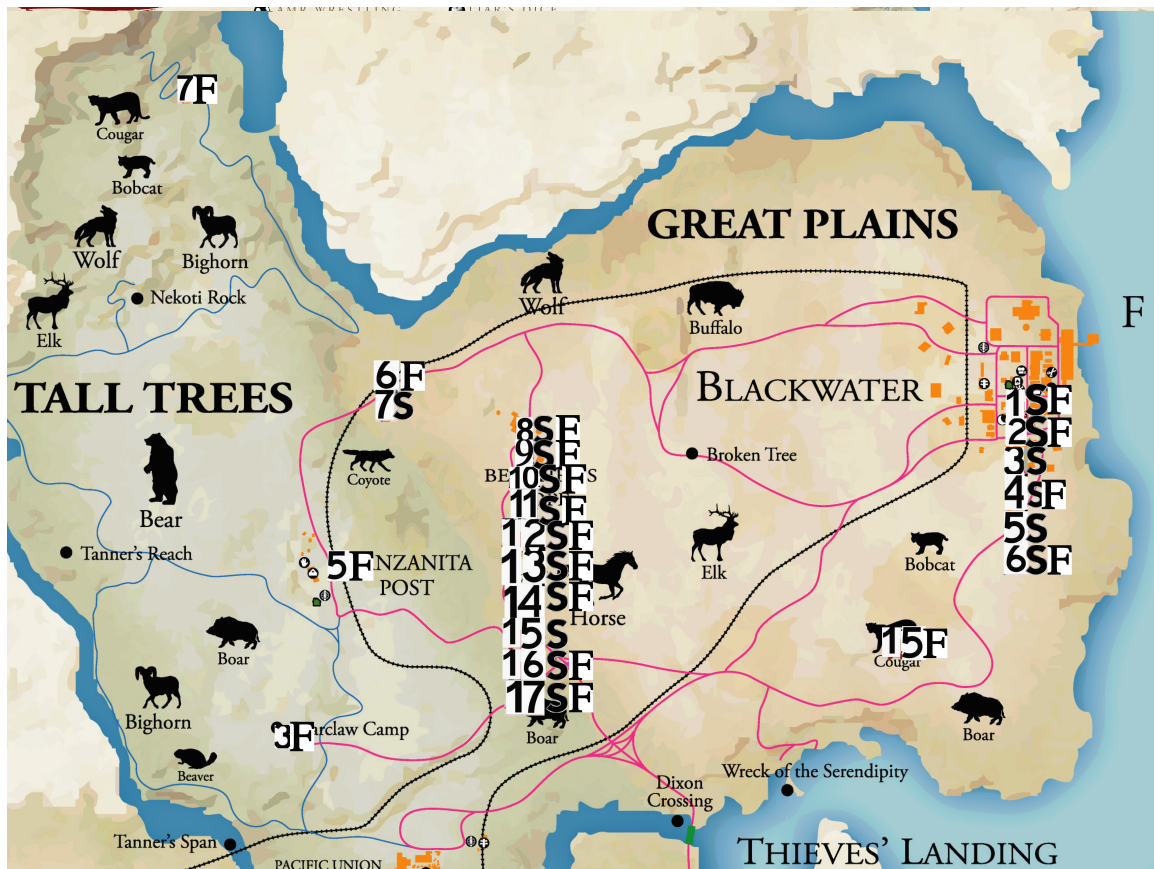


Figure 7: Missions that begin and end in the same place are designated SF. Missions 8-17 all start and end in the exact same place, and John rarely moves very far during these missions. Original image by Jonathan T. Flynn; Red Dead Wiki; <http://reddead.wikia.com>; June 23, 2013; Web. Mission locations added by author, April 26, 2014.



The third act of *Red Dead Redemption* involves John Marston working with the corrupt FBI agents in a small, industrialized town to repel a series of monotonous attacks from fading outlaws. During these missions, there is no true sense, as there was in the preceding acts, of narrative progression or of a grand plan gradually being implemented piece by piece. Each attack is much like the last and leaves John no closer to his goal. The distance covered over the course of these missions is very small. In addition, most of the missions end in the same place or near the same place that they began. Thus, there is no true progression or direction for player movement in the third act. The missions get even more cyclical and confining once the player enters the Beecher's Hope sequence, a series of ten missions that all begin and end in the same area and generally feature very little action. In terms of the narrative, these missions all take place at a time when John is trying to make a break from his criminal past, and the Beecher's Hope missions represent his efforts through missions that take place over a much smaller scale. In this way, whereas the events in the second act were dramatic and sweeping, both spatially and in terms of their plot developments, the third act is restless and sedentary, with a plodding series of minor confrontations playing out over a very small area of space. The civilized, easternmost area of the map seems trivial and boring in comparison to the vast distances and major turns the player sees and takes part in during the preceding acts.

In this way, the game uses space to tell the narrative of the end of the frontier by introducing the player first to an area with a well-defined frontier boundary between its eastern and western portions that privileges westward movement, and

then inducting the player into an area that is both much smaller than that which proceeded it, and with missions that take a cyclical path. Through this juxtaposition, the game creates a thematic reflection of John Marston's own loss of freedom and agency through his forced service to government officials and eventual death at their hands.

### **View Distance In *Red Dead Redemption***

In his study of video game space, Van Camp states:

We made the icebergs huge because we wanted to make the users feel really small and vulnerable. Unfortunately, during tests, we noticed that it made the world seem really small as well because you couldn't see far (unpaginated).

In this way, high elevations make the world seem smaller horizontally even as they make it feel bigger vertically. *Red Dead Redemption* uses this principle to narrative effect, by inviting contrasts between its high and low areas. Except for a few odd hills, the topography of New Austin is mostly a flat, straightforward expanse of level plain. The horizon is almost always in view, giving a vast and epic feeling to the land. The boundaries are very jagged along the northern side, and consist of water on their eastern and westernmost sides. This captures the openness of the plain and the promise of the frontier, situating the narrative comfortably within the bounds of a conventional Western.

The topography of the second act is a constant contrast of highs and lows; the player is constantly dwarfed by huge plateaus or facing a vast, flat plains. Though at times this contrast can make the space seem smaller, particularly when compared to the sweeping expanses of space in New Austin, the game spaces out its vertical features during the second act so that they only blot out the horizon one way. The rise in elevation is rarely gradual in Nuevo Paraiso. Instead it is sudden, leading to a series of abrupt plateaus, rather than incremental mountains. This landscape accomplishes two things: first, it symbolically conveys the economic inequality in Mexico and the class stratification that is a persistent theme of the second act's narrative, with most of the upper ruling class based on top of plateaus and mountains and the lower class dwellings in the basins below them (see note 3). Second, it gives the land an epic, mythic quality. If the space in the first act established the frontier ethos and the promise of the land, the second conveys the epic mythos surrounding gunfighters and cowboys in the classical Western genre. For much of the second act, John Marston is at the direction of Landon Ricketts, a legendary gunfighter who teaches John to be a gunfighter, and moreover, to be a hero. There is a sense in the second act that the events are already being canonized into legend, with the revolutionary leader of the peasant uprising already composing hyperbolic ballads of his and John's exploits. John's own battle cry while in Mexico: "John! Marston! Remember the Nombre," as well as the naming of some of the missions ("Mexican Caesar" and "Daedalus and Icarus") is further evidence of this legendary theme. The extreme contrast of high and low builds up the dramatic aspects of the cowboy narrative surrounding John, even while his vacillation

between rebel and dictator occupied spaces works to question and even deconstruct the notion that he is noble or even good. This juxtaposition between spatial elements crafts the game's key message – that although there was some truth to the Western myth, the history of the west itself was consciously constructed by those who were in power.

The third act of *Red Dead Redemption* features far more incremental changes in the terrain. While there are very noticeable changes in elevation, they are so perfectly slight that they almost don't register. The effect of these gradual slopes is to blot out the horizon line and convey a sense of confinement, as in Van Camp's analysis. The boundaries of the map also work to this effect; the borders are almost completely linear and flat on two sides; the only jagged sides is the westernmost edge, facing the frontier, and the southernmost side, facing Mexico. In addition, the lowest point on the map, the town of Blackwater proper, is where players start most of their missions, making getting anywhere a literal uphill battle. This use of space implies that civilization is confining rather than liberating. In addition, most of the climactic confrontation takes place at the height of a mountain, giving a sense of both confinement and difficulty. Here, in the third act, the player is no longer the master of the land, but its opponent; John Marston's final chapters see him hemmed in by marginal slopes on either side.

## **Weenies**

In his study on game architecture, Van Camp uses the Disneyland castle as a metaphor for video game landmarks. Walt Disney, when designing Disneyland, first

coined the term “Weenie” to describe a structure that would be easily visible from anywhere in the park, thus establishing a continuity for the park space, as well as providing visitors with a guide by which they can tell where they are. In video games, Van Camp argues, Weenies are used as well to give players a better sense of spatial unity and to act as a compass by which they can navigate.

Weenies provides players with a reference point...good weenies are always made in a way that they are visible from any point in the landscape...Weenies can briefly pause users in a way that they will absorb and be in awe of their environment (unpaginated)

There is only one true Weenie in *Red Dead Redemption*, that being the huge cliff face that marks the frontier line in New Austin, which, as previously mentioned, demarcates the end of civilized country and the beginning of the savage West. The centrality of this metaphoric landmark serves as a Weenie, defining, throughout the first portion of the game, the player’s sense of the map.

In Nuevo Paraiso, there is no such central point, but there are numerous points of interest, or POIs, characterized by as “essentially a smaller scale Weenie” (Van Camp unpaginated) (see fig 8).



Figure 8: Key points of interest in the second act of *Red Dead Redemption*. All images by Jackfrost23; Red Dead Wiki; <http://reddead.wikia.com>, March 6, 2011; Web.

The second portion of *Red Dead Redemption* is defined less by a monolithic cultural symbol as it is by lesser mythologies. Whereas most of the features of New Austin are named either after the men who owned them or according to their literal names (i.e. Critchley's Ranch, Twin Rocks), most of the points of interest in Nuevo Paraiso, such as mesa de la luna (Table of the Moon) mesa del sol (Table of the Sun) and Ojo del Diablo (Eye of the Devil), are named for cosmological entities or figures in Judeo-Christian mythology. The use of many visually striking POIs give the land a mythic quality that complements the narrative's focus on Western myth and legend and the creation or fabrication of history.

West Elizabeth has almost no POIs whatsoever and certainly no Weenies. In fact, most of the structures in West Elizabeth are distinctly not Weenie. Whereas the centrality of the Weenie on the map is the key to its power and visibility from every part of the map, nearly all the structures of any significance in West Elizabeth are pushed to the edges of the map, with only an empty, raised hill in the middle. This hill itself becomes the main anti-Weenie in West Elizabeth as its unremarkable

centrality occludes all other significant features. In this way, the game neutralizes and makes uniform the land in its final chapters, reducing the features of West Elizabeth to a series of disconnected localities.

Through its use of Weenies and Points of Interest, *Red Dead Redemption* complements its narrative themes by conveying, in its first act, the centrality of the frontier to the Western narrative. In its second act, the game uses multiple points of interest as metaphors from the men of legend and historical myth that have become embedded in the western narrative. Finally, the game ushers the player into a landscape bereft of POI, except for a central feature that masks the landscape in order to capture to the lack of connection, the conscious isolation, and the retreat into private dwellings that characterizes the most pessimistic views of modern society.

### **Time in *Red Dead Redemption***

From an academic viewpoint, time in a game as open as *Red Dead Redemption* is an almost useless metric, as it varies too widely between players. Whereas space in most games is constant across all playthroughs, time is never the same, even between two playthroughs of the same player. Thus, time spent playing a game is all but entirely subjective. There are, however, some games in which time is much more structured. In *Journey* (2012), for instance, a significant number of levels have a set speed at which players are forced to move. This set speed is different in each explicitly demarcated level, and thus the differing speeds through which players move inform their sense of space in a dynamic way.

The set speed in *Journey* is a form of spatial juxtaposition, because it creates a contrast between players' interactions with the space around them at different times. *Journey* uses set speed to full narrative effect by drastically lowering the speed at which players are able to move at the point in the narrative where the player character is weakest and near death. Immediately after, *Journey* accelerates the set speed to its fastest as the player character comes back to life in full command of his powers. Thus *Journey* communicates the symbolic death and resurrection of the player character through the speed with which the character is made to move through space.

While for the most part, player movement in *Red Dead Redemption* is decided entirely by the player, there are missions in which the player is made to travel at a set speed. During these missions the emphasis is often explicitly on how fast or how slow the player character is made to move. Thus it is not the amount of time itself that is significant in *Red Dead Redemption*, but the structuring of speed and therefore time, or lack thereof.

In the first act *Red Dead Redemption*, time is almost entirely unstructured; players are free to move through the landscape at the pace and direction that they want to, with the exception of occasional missions during which players have to follow the lead of a NPC guiding them. Even during these missions, however, players have the ultimate control over their own movement, and the NPCs often change their speed to accommodate players' choice of pace. Riding free across the open plain of New Austin, there is almost a sense of timelessness accompanying the



player's freedom of movement. In the latter half of the game, however, players are made to conform to external schedules.

In the second act, especially in its latter half, there are a series of missions on board a train in which players must stop the train before it runs off a cliff, protect the train for a given amount of time, or board the train before it reaches a certain location. In all these instances, time becomes a player's opponent and thus asserts itself more than in the previous act. Players' speed is in this way more dictated than in the previous act.

The final act both begins and ends with the player as a passenger in a vehicle. When John Marston first arrives in Blackwater, he is met by a clerk who is counting money at a constant, unwavering pace. The clerk ignores John's greetings and continues to count at the same monotonous rhythm. This early detail proves prophetic of the rest of the mission, in which John is made to ride along with government officials in an early motorcar. During the extended journey, John argues with the men about the benefits of the new technology that the car represents, maintaining that traditional means of transportation are faster, and remarking "give me a horse any day." (Bear One Another's Burdens). The car is arduously slow, and the camera, which cuts incessantly from one angle to another, further disrupts any sense of spatial progression. Later in the mission, the automobile breaks down, forcing John to protect the two officials while they repair it. Key to this last detail is that car drivers are in a sense more driven by their cars than their cars are driven by them, and that it is the technology, rather than the operator, that is truly in charge of the pace of movement.

Later, in the penultimate Blackwater mission, John Marston is forced by his government overseers to man a machine gun on the back of an armored truck and to mow down American Indians. This mission plays out more like a massacre than a battle, and while John Marston makes it clear that he is disgusted by the proceedings, the player is not free to change the course of the vehicle, nor even to exit the vehicle. Despite the fact that the Indians have been portrayed more or less sympathetically throughout the game, if the player refuses or does not kill enough of them, then (s)he fails the mission. In this final mission, the forced monotony of structured time that the game has established as integral to new technology and the emerging East take on far more sinister undertones, by compelling John Marston, and by extension, players, to commit atrocities against their will. The FBI officials comment during this mission that WWI “will be a short war for us with these” (And You Shall Know the Truth) further situates the emerging technology within the modern context of mass killings by governments and their citizens’ silent complicity.

This intricate linking of impotent complicity with a structuring of time fundamental to a modern era is strikingly reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s anecdote of

An automaton...constructed [so] that it would counter any move of a chess player with a counter-move and thereby assure itself of victory in a match...in truth, a hunchbacked dwarf who was a master chess-player sat inside...One can envision a corresponding object to this

apparatus in philosophy. The puppet called “historical materialism” is always supposed to win. (1).

Benjamin goes on to explain how the existing hegemony “was determined by a concept of progress which did not hold to reality, but had a dogmatic claim” (Benjamin 13). According to Benjamin, the sense of a perpetual, structured progression toward popular rule becomes the chief means through which existing powers assure their oppression. Under the shelter of this notion of rhythmic progress, rulers are free to justify any oppression or atrocity they see fit.

In *Red Dead Redemption*, this sense of progress is technological as much as it is political. The mechanical progression of the set speeds in *Red Dead Redemption* is evocative of the American notion of Manifest Destiny—a forever progressing and expanding democracy that carries a similar weight and purpose to Benjamin’s “concept of progression through a homogenous and empty time” (Benjamin 13). The slaughter of the Indians exposes the lie central both to manifest destiny and to the impetus to tame the Western landscape. Whereas Benjamin advocates Marxist revolution as the antidote to the illusion of progress, however, *Red Dead Redemption* prescribes neoliberalism and a return to individual empowerment. The spatial juxtaposition of boundless, player-determined movement in New Austin with the lack of player control, monotony, and horrific implications of West Elizabeth’s set speeds establishes the former as the clear preferred choice. In context, this use of spatial juxtaposition argues that the free movement of individuals to determine their own direction and destiny is always preferable to adherence to government

entities. The contrast between these two modes of movement only further reinforces the narrative conflict between the east and the west and the overarching notion of the death of the West.

## **Spatial Genres**

*Red Dead Redemption's* use of spatial juxtaposition for narrative effect is not limited only to the space in *Red Dead Redemption*, but also extends to the space in other, similar titles. *Red Dead Redemption* consciously constructs its space and iconography to suggest that it meets the criteria and falls under certain genres of video games. Thus, a player familiar with games in that genre will instantly recognize *Red Dead Redemption* as a member of that genre and compare its spatial structure and narrative arc with other games of the same genre. Through this juxtaposition between *Red Dead Redemption's* own space and that found in games of the same genre, the game is capable of constructing narrative spatial juxtapositions.

In the section of his book on defining genre in video games, Mark Wolf writes that the “game’s objective is a motivational force for the player, and this, combined with the various forms of interactivity present in the game, are useful places to start in building a set of video game genres” (115). According to Wolf, the objectives of video games, more than their iconography, should be used to situate them within their respective genres. I would go further in suggesting that for some, though not all, of the genres that Wolf puts forward, the ways in which space is objectified are the primary means through which video game classifications are applied. For instance, in the Adventure genre, Wolf writes that “objectives usually must be

completed in steps, for example, finding keys and unlocking doors to other areas” (118). Wolf goes on to state that “this term should not be used for games in which screens are only encountered in one-way linear fashion” (118) (see note 5) Indeed, the central objective in Adventure games is unlocking or otherwise gaining access to new spaces and that the complication of player access to new spaces is the driving principle behind such classification. Similarly, in his characterization of platform games Wolf writes that “this term should not be used for games that do not involve ascending heights or advancement through a series of levels” (128). Thus, we can see that objectification of the high ground is an essential component of the platform game.

Wolf goes on to write: “some games...feature different sequences or scenarios, each of which can be categorized into different genres” (116). Where Wolf puts sequences, I substitute spaces. The essence of the *Civilization* series could be said to be the opposition between two spatial objectives: the need to manage or improve the player’s own space and the need to conquer enemy spaces. Thus, within the player’s own borders the (s)he is engaged in a management simulation game, but outside of their borders the player is playing a strategy game. Often, the goals and challenges of one inform the other; the player will have to choose between spending resources on cultivation of their own space and spending it on the conquest of enemy spaces. Similarly, in *Assassins Creed II* (2010), the city of Monteriggioni can be renovated in exchange for currency obtained from missions. Thus, within the city of Monteriggioni, the player can be said to be playing a

Management Simulation game, whereas outside the city, the player might be playing a dodging, platform, or combat game.

Central to genre in any medium, as Steven Neale writes, are “specific systems of expectations and hypothesis that the audience brings with them” (156), whether they be for iconography, structure, or spatial objectification. Part of the effectiveness of the narrative use of space in *Red Dead Redemption* comes from the genre expectations for spatial objectification that the player brings from other games. As a game, *Red Dead Redemption* has qualities of both an open world RPG and a sandbox shooter. Wolf writes that the criteria for a role-playing game, or RPG, are characters “represented by various statistics” (130). Like a traditional RPG character, John Marston has a series of skills that can be leveled up by completing various tasks. Leveling these skills gives John Marston new abilities and provides bonuses to player efficacy in performing new functions. For instance, shooting a certain number of birds within a given space of time with a rifle in *Red Dead Redemption* gives the player access to the buffalo rifle, a more high-powered rifle, just as killing a certain number of enemies with a short sword in *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* (2006) allows the player to equip more high-powered short swords.

Mark Wolf’s characterization of the role-playing game genre is incomplete by his own definition of genre, however, in that it only accounts for iconography while ignoring player interactivity and objectives. Well known role-playing game designer, Nicholas Fortugno, states that RPGs players “are motivated beyond escapism into the participation of the creation of an aesthetic object” (McKay 121) Using one RPG as an example, Daniel McKay characterizes this created aesthetic object as

The story of five characters who changed the face and soul of Abeer-Toril. It is the story of five nobodies, each from unpromising beginnings...through their endurance, persistence humor and survival savvy, proved that the game was about them (123).

Key here is that statistics based player characters are only a means to an end in RPG's, while the objective is to use player abilities and statistics to better define the characters and the world itself in ways that reflect character identity, abilities, and choices. Through a creative performance, players create a narrative by using characters tools to change a world.

McKay suggests that role-playing video games work in a similar way to their paper and pencil brethren, only "the computer serves as a surrogate gamemaster" (24). There is, however, a key distinction in that role-playing games are, in a sense, prepackaged, and constitute less of an original performance and more of an adherence to an existing one. The aesthetic object has already been created, and players merely participate consumptively, rather than creatively, in the narrative. Nonetheless, the appeals are the same, using player characters to create a narrative and redefine the world in which the characters exist. A hallmark of the role-playing video games is missions that serve to redefine the game space itself in accordance with player choices and identity. For instance, in the game *Fable* (2004), completion of missions results in renown, which affects how the NPC's relate to the player character. *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) has a similar metric, called fame, also acquired from completing missions. When John Marston's fame is significantly high,

NPC's can be heard exchanging tales of John Marston's deeds when he is out of earshot, thus facilitating the sense that the player's actions are having a demonstrable effect on the game space.

In many RPG's, actions and decisions can fundamentally alter the space of the game itself. In *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) by choosing to be good, the player is made to purge a Sith training ground of Korriban, turning the site into an abandoned ruin, while choosing the evil alignment allows the player to take command of the space, using it as a market for buying and selling weapons and inspiring the awe of all there. Similarly, at one point in the story the player character is put on trial by the city of Manaan, and if their persuasion is leveled up sufficiently, they gain access to the city and win acclaim from its residents, whereas if their persuasion is not sufficient, they are permanently banned from the city and its resources. Thus, the key appeal of role-playing games is the promise that players will be able to use their increasingly powerful to character to transform the game space and that their decisions and actions will impact the game world in dynamic ways, either ruling the space and its inhabitants or purging it of its occupants.

The traits of a sandbox game are similar, in a less structured format. Sandbox games are designed to give the player a great degree of choice about how to reach objectives and generally the player has multiple, nondependent objectives to accomplish at any given time. Moreover, many of these objectives are not explicitly stated, and the player is not prompted to accomplish them at all. How, when, and in what order these tasks are accomplished is left up to the player's discretion. Finally, in sandbox games, the world changes according to how the player accomplishes the



objectives, with multiple possible permutations existing according to the order and method through which the player achieves those goals. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), for instance, and in *Red Dead Redemption* as well, all the characters that the player meets are killable, and depending on which ones the player kills, there are a plethora of narrative outcomes. Sandbox games allow players, through choices of their own design, to feel mastery over an environment.

Because of these genre traits, an experienced player familiar with Rockstar's other games and games from the RPG genre will go into the game with a number of expectations. Players can reasonably expect the game to provide ample opportunities to affect and change the game space in dynamic ways as well as to allow complete control over the character that they create. *Red Dead Redemption*, however, refuses to comply with these expectations, subverting them at every turn by denying the player sovereignty both over John Marston and over the game space.

In one of the side quests, John is asked to bring medicine to a woman stranded in the desert. After finding the medicine, the player brings it to the woman, who appears as though she will get better, but dies later. In a similar mission, John is tasked with tracking down a young man in the desert in order to bring him back to civilization. John finds him, but the man escapes and is later found dead against a rock. In an RPG, saving these characters would likely result in their becoming recurring characters in order to reinforce a sense of consequence for the player, but here these characters perish regardless of whether the player correctly performs the actions the game asks him to, subverting the player's expectations and giving the player a sense that John Marston is powerless over the world around him. In

another mission, John is tasked by a stranger with two simple moral choices: encourage a man to cheat on his wife or talk him out of it and either contribute to a nun's charity or rob the collector. Whereas players in an RPG such as *Fable* (2004) or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) in which the player is denied or granted access to new spaces and plot developments as a reward or consequence of moral or amoral behavior, could reasonably expect there to be multiple outcomes with demonstrable effects upon the game space depending on the player's choices, in *Red Dead Redemption's* side quest, players are given only one ending regardless of whether they make the moral or amoral choice. In the ending, the mysterious man tasking John with tests of morality, who is heavily implied to be Satan, tells John to "think on your sins" (I Know You), regardless of whether he has committed sins in the course of the mission. For a player who has played the quest morally, this comment harkens back to John's outlaw past that he is trying to buck. Thus events that predated the player's gaining control of John Marston continue to damn him despite his attempted atonement, denying the player sovereignty over even the character (s)he is playing. The game's repeated disempowerment of John and the player (see note 1) juxtaposes the player's expectations of the genre's use of space and the way the space is rendered immutable to the player, creating a narrative of the loss of freedom to shape and tame primitive wilderness to one's own design that comes with the end of the frontier.

## Conclusion

*Red Dead Redemption* utilizes a series of contrasts in its spatial construction to convey complex narrative threads and cultural notions to the player. Such spatial juxtapositions occur not only between the spaces presented in the game itself, but also between the game space and the space in other games that preceded it. The spatial contrasts in *Red Dead Redemption* go far beyond the moment to moment, simple emotional evocations that previous authors document and represent a far larger narrative framework whose pieces add up to a fundamental Western syntactic structure: the end of a concrete boundary between the East and West at the hands of technological advances and government incursions, with the effect of disempowering the rugged individuals making on their own way in the wild. Whereas these men used to hold their fate in their own hands, for better or worse, encroaching society ensures that no man is an island. All of these narrative elements are coded in a series of spatial contrasts, which then evoke other spatial contrasts, creating a rapidly compounded and elaborate narrative structure through spatial metaphor.

These contrasts supplement other narrative modes, such as dialogue and music. Still spatial juxtaposition should not be as redundant, but can go further in capturing themes or evoking emotions than music or words ever could. While many narrative themes are conveyed through spatial juxtaposition are necessarily reflected in the games other narrative elements, spatial configuration should not be overlooked as a principle means of narrative communication.

Although the Western genre, which Rick Altman locates “on the border

between two lands, between two eras, and with a hero who remains divided between two value systems” (10), is an ideal stage on which to build a grammar based on contrasts and juxtapositions of spatial features and interactions, I would argue in closing that this means of narrative communication is by no means unique to *Red Dead Redemption*. Many players have pointed to games such as *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005) and *Journey* (2011) as games that, despite having very limited traditional narratives (*Journey* being completely without dialogue), still create a moving emotional experience. It is likely that spatial juxtapositions are a principle means by which such emotions are coded in these games. From this perspective, there are numerous games likely using spatial juxtapositions as a narrative device in ways that have not yet been enumerated.

Space, as the principle constituent of most modern games, is likely a fundamental aspect of games that serves more than a simply pragmatic function. Just as Eisenstein argues that the contrasts between conjoined frames forms the essential narrative basis of film, I would assert that juxtaposition of spatial features and interactions between separate, but similar spaces is a key aspect of how many games communicate narrative elements, be they subtle emotional notes or overarching cultural concepts key to the game’s story, as seen in *Red Dead Redemption*.

## Notes

1. In the first side quest John Marston must find and stop a cannibal from killing townfolk. Upon finding him, the player is given the option to either kill the cannibal, ending the murder spree, or walk away and leave the cannibal to kill again.

The second side quest contains a similar moral test at its conclusion. The player can either acquire the water rights to a plot of land by force and make a handsome profit or purchase the rights legally for a much smaller reward. If the player chooses the violent route, the deed to the water is damaged in the process and becomes useless. In both these quests, John is given a clear choice between right and wrong and is empowered through his ability to determine the life or death of others. John's status as a rugged individual with the power of moral agency is clear here. In addition, the game rewards good actions while punishing bad ones.

In the second act, John is asked to rescue a package from bandits. John does so only to learn that the package is smuggled opium and that the bandits are a rival smuggling faction. Upon learning this, John has the option of either turning the opium in for a reward or not accepting payment for the quest. In this mission, in contrast to the earlier ones, the morality is no longer clear-cut from the outset, and John has no means of being the hero or affecting the world. However, he can still make a moral decision in the end and thereby maintain his own values even if there is no reward for standing by them.

In the third act, the first mission follows John as he tries to help an expectant mother get money to support herself and her child. A wealthy man she worked for forced himself upon her and impregnated her. She enlists John's help to make him

give her money to support herself and the baby. In confronting the man, John ends up killing him when he resists, but John gets the money for the woman. After giving the money to the woman, John later learns from that man's widow that he was used; the woman never worked for them and was not, in fact, pregnant at all.

In these side quests John increasingly finds himself in a moral grey area with his fate out of his own hands. When John is responsible, in the missions for saving Bonnie McFarland from being hung by bandits, he has clear moral choices and consequences. Later, he is forced into service by the federal government to fight the local American Indian population, a clearly immoral task that John takes no pleasure in doing. Thus, the game systematically deconstructs John as a hero and as a rugged individual by gradually rescinding his moral agency along with his masculine authority to determine the outcomes of his missions. Such outcomes go beyond John Marston's material loss of home, family, and life that Humphrey notes is in keeping with the neoliberal narrative. The lack of moral choice and meaningful consequence in the latter missions dismantle the core neoliberal conception of John Marston as the paragon of masculine agency by disempowering him both morally and authoritatively.

2. Humphreys describes the character of Bonnie Macfarlane in great detail. She begins by stating: "Bonnie is a materialist" (207) and gives as evidence the Bonnies' claim in the game that "Businessmen are the new cowboys." She goes on to add: "Bonnie is a curious character in the narrative. She is not a woman masquerading as a male figure, but a type of masculine female." (207) What Humphreys touches on here, is that the space in *Red Dead Redemption* is fundamentally gendered. As

Humphreys states, the frontier paradigm is a construction of masculine ideology, but it is also a paradigm that delineates the American continent into the untamed masculine West and the domestic, feminine East. This division is consistent with Daphne Spain's assertion that:

Men and Women tend to perform different tasks divided fairly consistently along gender role stereotypes: Men hunt, women cook and care for children...since hunting typically occurs far from the dwelling, while cooking and child care occur close to it, spatial distinctions are an integral part of the gender division of labor (14).

The West then, which in *Red Dead Redemption's* landscape has very few dwelling structures, is associated with a masculine hunt for sustenance, which in the modern world translates to economic stability. The East, by contrast, which in both the historical period and in *Red Dead Redemption's* landscape features dense urban dwellings, is primarily a space given to women. Very few women live beyond the huge cliff that represents the frontier divide. In fact, in two of these missions, "The Hanging of Bonnie Macfarland" and "Jenny's Faith," John Marston is called to escort women stranded within the western, masculine space, back across the border to the eastern, feminine space.

The central dichotomy within this gendered division of labor is that between hunting and cooking, that men acquire the raw materials while women transform these materials in consumable goods or otherwise maintain existing structures. This division is consistent within the story missions of *Red Dead Redemption*; Bonnie is

the caretaker of the domestic space she inherited from her father, a masculine provider who built it. In one key mission, the player rides with Bonnie's father to break horses, which, according to Bonnie, is one of her father's favorite activities. In the course of this mission, the player, playing as John, breaks horses, alongside Bonnie's father and one male ranch hand, but Bonnie never breaks them. Instead, she takes the now domesticated horses back to the ranch for stabling. In this way, the gendered division of labor is upheld; the men venture out and acquire the resources, while the women store and situate these resources in a domestic space. Thus, Humphreys' characterization of Bonnie as a materialist is entirely consistent with the notion of women as the maintainers within a domestic space of the material spoils the men bring in from the outside world.

On the *Red Dead Redemption* website, the women are characterized as "Saints, Sinners, and Survivors." (RockstarGames.com/reddeademption, features/people) Passing over the obvious archetypal virgin and whore dichotomy embodied in the first two terms, we come to the notion of women as survivors. There are very few actual female characters in the *Red Dead Redemption*, but all of them could safely be said to be "Survivors" in some way. The two major female characters are Bonnie and Luisa, a Mexican rebel who leads a peasant revolution against the Mexican government. In both of these cases, these women go on to become defiant survivors, adopting masculine traits after a great injustice is done to them by others. Both of these injustices involve burning buildings. Bonnie urges John Marston to fight the outlaws after her barn is burned down, and Luisa takes up arms against the Mexican government after soldiers burn her house down. This



destruction of domestic, feminine spaces accounts for what Humphreys calls Bonnie's "curious character" (207). Both Bonnie and Luisa are survivors of attacks that robbed them of their feminine spaces and thereby, of their female identities. Stranded in the masculine space of the outside world, these women are forced to assume masculine characteristics to survive. In this way, *Red Dead Redemption* accounts for the presence of women in its otherwise masculine space.

3. Throughout the Mexico portion of *Red Dead Redemption*, there is a consistent contrast between ruling class structures, whose dwellings are found on the highest elevations and the peasant class structures, whose dwellings are found at the lowest elevations. For instance, El Presidio, the ruling dictatorship's central structure and object of main authority, is found at the top basin in all of Mexico (see fig 9).



Figure 9: Dictatorial stronghold El Presidio on ridge of a cliff face.  
Image by author. April 26, 2014. Screenshot.

In contrast, Luisa, the game's archetypal peasant and symbol of the Mexican lower class, lives at the base of a ridge (see fig 10).



Figure 10: Luisa's house, dwarfed by cliffs.  
Image by author. April 26, 2014. Screenshot.

Similarly, the main Mexican city of Escalera, which translates literally to *ladder* or *stairway*, is stratified along class lines (see fig 11). The peasant rundown huts are on the lowest level, the middle class houses on the second elevation, and the governor's palace on the highest rung.



Figure 11: The ornate highest rung of Escalera (top), juxtaposed with the ramshackle structures of the lowest rung (bottom).  
Image by author. April 26, 2014. Screenshot.

In addition, many of the missions in which John Marston is fighting for the dictatorship involve charging downhill, while most of the missions in which John is fighting for the rebels involve charging uphill. These missions in particular are reminiscent of Kristen Whissel's argument that Hollywood movies use clashes between characters on different points of the vertical axis to evoke "the visual pleasures of power and powerlessness. Precisely because verticality implies the intersection of two opposed forces—gravity and the force required to overcome it—it is an ideal technique for visualizing power" (23).

In this way, the intense stratification of the elevations throughout Mexico becomes an extended metaphor for the country's critical class disparity.

#### 4. New Austin Missions in order:

1. Exodus in American
2. New Friends, Old problems.
3. Obstacles in our paths.
4. This is Armadillo, USA.
5. Political Realities in Armadillo.
6. Justice in Pike's Basin
7. Women and Cattle.
8. Wild Horses, Tamed Passions.
9. Spare the Rod, Spoil the Bandit.
10. Old Swindler Blues.
11. You shall not give false testimony, except for profit.
12. A Tempest Looms.
13. The Burning.
14. Exhuming and other fine hobbies.
15. Hanging Bonnie Macfarland.
16. A Gentle Ride with Friends.
17. Liars Cheats and other Proud Americans.
18. Let the Dead Bury their Dead.
19. A Frenchman, a Welshman, and an Irishman.
20. Can a Swindler Change his Spots?
21. Man is Born Unto Trouble.
22. On Shaky's Ground.
23. The Sport of Kings, and Liars.

#### Nuevo Paraiso Missions in order:

1. And We Shall Be Together in Paradise
2. The Gunslinger's Tragedy.
3. Landon Rickett's Rides Again.
4. Lucky in Love.
5. The Mexican Wagon Train.
6. Civilization, at any Price.
7. My Sister's Keeper.
8. The Demon Drink.
9. Empty Promises.
10. Must a Savior Die?
11. Mexican Caesar.
12. Cowards Die Many Times.
13. Father Abraham.
14. Captain De Santa's Downfall.
15. The Great Mexican Train Robbery.
16. The Gates of El Presidio.
17. An Appointed Time.

#### West Elizabeth Missions in Order:

1. Bear One Another's Burdens.
2. At Home with Dutch.
3. Great Men are Not Always Wise.
4. For Purely Scientific Purposes.
5. The Prodigal Son Returns (to Yale).
6. And You Will Know the Truth.
7. And the Truth Will Set You Free.
8. The Outlaw's Return.
9. Pestilence.
10. John Marston and Son.
11. Wolves Dogs and Sons.
12. Old Friends, New Problems.
13. Spare the Love, Spoil the Child.
15. By Sweat and Toil.
16. A Continual Feast.
17. The Last Enemy that Shall Be Destroyed.

This order was determined by going from the end of each mission to the nearest start of another mission. While there is some variability in the order of the missions, the discussed implications are consistent across all possible orders.

5. By “screens,” Wolf is referring to the two-dimensional games of the time in which a room took up the entire screen. Today, in three-dimensional games, Adventure games are still comprised of a series of rooms that work much in the same way, but these no longer take up the whole screen.

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