

**SIGNIFYING AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE VIDEO
GAME "RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2"**

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Tämä kandidaatintutkielma tutkii amerikkalaisuuden representaatiota Arthur Morganin hahmon kautta videopelissä <i>Red Dead Redemption 2</i> (Rockstar Games. 2018). Representaatio konseptina perustuu Stuart Hallin representaatioteoriaan ja soveltuvia teoreettisia käsitteitä diskurssintutkimuksen saralta sovelletaan videopelikontekstiin. Koska videopelit ovat verrattain uusi tutkimuksenala, ja representaatiotutkimus edustaa vain osaa siitä, tämä kandidaatintutkielma tahtoo kannustaa osallistumista tälle pienelle, mutta kasvavalle tutkimuskentälle.</p> <p>Aineisto koostui välianimaatioista ja dialogeista, joiden valitsemisessa pääkriteerinä oli se, että ne kertoivat jotain amerikkalaisesta identiteetistä ja merkeistä, joilla tätä ilmaistaan. Sen jälkeen aineistoa verrattiin yleispiirteisiin amerikkalaisiin arvoihin, Arthurin englannin variaatiota tarkasteltiin, ja vaatteita ja erinäisiä vapauden symboleita, joita Arthur joko omisti tai kantoi mukanaan arvioitiin osana representaatiota.</p> <p>Sekä kielelliset että semioottiset resurssit olivat osa amerikkalaisen hengen ja ideaalien kuvausta. Siitä syystä, että representaatioita käytetään kulttuurissa yhä uudelleen, Arthurin representaatio näyttäytyy osana lännentarinagenren lainsuojaton- tai cowboykuvauksen jatkumoa. Tulokset myös vahvistivat kansallisen identiteetin olevan verrattain kestävä identiteetti. Arthurin representaatiossa oli myös viitteitä etelä-yhdysvaltalaiseen kulttuuriin, jota joskus kuvataan negatiivistenkin stereotyyppien kautta, mutta Arthurin hahmo kykenee pakenemaan tätä kuvausta yksilöivämpään representaatioon.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Field of game studies has grown exponentially in the past decade among many disciplines. In the most recent decades, especially literary and art studies, have investigated video games in increasing numbers (Mäyrä 2008: 11). Game studies are indeed characterized by their multidisciplinary nature. As video games are a quite complex object of study, the contribution of various fields does seem necessary. Although some research has been carried out on representation in video games, there have been few studies about representation of national identity in particular.

This thesis aims to analyse the representation of “Americanness” in the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018) with a focus on the protagonist, Arthur Morgan. “Americanness” is seen as a cultural construct that is re-evaluated and rebuilt in the society; its meaning is constantly negotiated by various social groups in the given society. Video games are seen as a cultural, symbolic activity and as culture or art is ultimately made by people for people, it can also communicate what being a human in this world means.

Culture is a widely contested and a difficult concept to define, and while bearing this in mind, this thesis follows the definition of culture suggested by Hall (1997). According to Hall, culture consists of shared meanings that participants of a culture interpret and share in order to make sense of the world. As cultures and people are in constant movement, representations are also culture-specific and in constant change.

Meanings can be represented, as well as interpreted, in a myriad of ways. I will attempt to find which signs represent Americanness through Arthur and what they imply about Americanness in general. Analysis will follow qualitative methods with a focus on representation studies and multimodality of signs. Discursive resources of video games will also be shortly discussed in relation to *Red Dead Redemption 2*. First, I will present some theoretical main concepts of representation and national identities in particular.

2 REPRESENTATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES

For the purposes of this thesis, Arthur Morgan's character is examined to see whether an American identity is reproduced in *Red Dead Redemption 2* and by which signs and representation the game resolves to do this. Drawing on social constructionist theories on identity and national identities as a part of popular culture, I attempt to establish a link between representation of Americanness and the way it is constructed through a video game. First, I will introduce the theoretical framework of representation and the related concepts, especially those relating to how identity is commonly theorized in representation studies. Then I will introduce some ideas how national identities are produced (especially in popular culture) and how cultural products depict North American nation as a united nation with unique identity.

2.1 Identity: produced with a shared code or language

Identities are needed to operate in the world and to organize a sense of self about us and others. Therefore they are defined by Weeks (1991, as cited by Hall 1997: 301) as *a necessary fiction or a necessary construction*. Representation studies focus on discovering the processes that are employed to construct identities through symbols. (Hall 1997: 301) Video games both rely on cultural symbols to communicate meanings and they also create representations. Art imitates life imitates art; video games reflect the

culture and they become the culture. Representation and identity construction is explored more after I will give one example how to approach the structure of video games. This will aid in understanding how game elements create meanings.

Mäyrä (2008: 17) divides the concept of a game into two main structures that organize player-game interaction. The first structure is *the core*, a layer of gameplay which includes the rules of the game and which kind of events or actions are possible in the game. This layer is important, because it will include things Arthur can do and what type of agency he is assigned in the game architecture. The second structure is *the shell*. The shell encompasses all semiotic resources that provide context or add to the gameplay experience, such as music design or visual style of the game. He refers to this structure also as “the game as representation and sign system” (Mäyrä 2008: 17). Shell includes character building, and this thesis will mostly focus on shell later in the analysis.

The interaction between core and shell elements is vital. For example, narratives may be used to give a player a meaningful reason to engage in the game-play. Without narrative, for example, Arthur forcing a train to stop by standing on an oil wagon would be just a material action during the gameplay. Within the narrative, his action gains meaning. It is a mean to survive in the Wild West, it is something the character has performed many times in his life and once again he stands as an example for other gang members to follow. If narrative was omitted during a scene like this, his actions would not have context beyond the immediate physical reality. Narratives also have social and discursive power required to normalize meanings (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 146-147). In terms of identity, video games may attempt to build a stable identity by creating a narrative that supports certain identity construction process.

Constructing meaning is an inherently human characteristic. Humans fix meanings to things that would not have any meaning *within* themselves. In some cultures, red traffic light stands for stop and green for the opposite; the meaning has become fixed through our shared language system and shared cultural concepts. (Hall 1997: 21, 26-27) Meanings are organized by *signs* that stand for some *concept*. In the traffic light example, signs are the colors red and green. The signs gain meaning through a shared *code* like a shared language (Hall 1997: 32). As we *encode* and *decode* the shared

code, the meaning becomes gradually fixed. Interpreting meaning is essentially a decoding process (Hall 1980: 134-135). Representations are therefore culturally shared meanings for communicating symbolic ideas between members of the culture, who can understand (or decode) our code.

In the case of identities, coding fixes the concept of identity in our culture. For this reason, Hall (1999: 250) emphasizes on identity being constructed not outside, but within representation. Even understanding the mere concept for the word 'identity' is the result of representing that idea by this specific junction of letters and circulating it within the culture. In other words, meaning is therefore a product of co-creation and interpretation. Representation is "re-presenting" shared meanings.

Before focusing more on theories of national identity in general, I will clarify the concept of identity as a construct instead of understanding it as a stable essence. As Edensor (2002: 29) succinctly puts it, when referring to identity as "fluid" or as something that is "constructed", it does not mean that identity lacks coherence, but rather that it *needs to be reproduced to ensure fixity*. Fluidity refers to procedures of expressing, understanding or conceptualizing identity and not (necessarily) to an internal state of transition within the identity. In fact, construction may be required for the identity to become more stable and also a distinct fragment of humanity. This reproduction can happen in cultural practices like video gaming involving game development, playing or being part of the gaming community.

2.2 Constructing a national identity

So far, we have looked into how linguistic processes build identities and negotiate meanings. In this chapter I will cover some ideas about national identity as it is expressed in popular culture works like video games. Edensor (2002: 4) points out that national identity is constructed by mundane daily rituals as much as it is exhibited in 'high' culture made by the cultural elite. According to Edensor, research has placed far too much emphasis on the large, eye-catching performances to explain nationalist ideation. Mundane, everyday habits and practices that people engage in in order to express and experience their identity have gained less coverage. Edensor also refers

to Bennett (1998: 28 cited in Edensor 2002: vi) who has defined Cultural Studies as a discipline that investigates “routines of life and habitual forms of conduct”. Therefore the mundane is not so mundane actually. This also pegs one to think that popular culture with products like video games can influence construction of nationality, possibly by offering ways to express one’s own identity or experiencing what belonging to another culture could entail. This would also mean that video games are an important source to study representation of nationalities.

Products like games that are played on a day-to-day basis and therefore engaged often can influence how different identities are viewed by their players in a broader context. The player can construct their own identity in relation to identities that they see expressed on the screen and simultaneously review and rebuild their mindset about different identities. This process can be very subtle as habitual or daily practices are difficult to discern over more unique, one-of-a-kind experiences such as singing a national anthem at the Finnish marketplace while celebrating Finnish ice-hockey Championship Gold. Even though identity can be constructed partly by governments or other authorities of a nation-state, it is also the end product of people participating in cultural practices like video gaming. In summary, the way national identity is expressed in popular culture is not insignificant for research.

2.3 Being an American

Edensor (2002: 45) explains how ideologies can be interpreted in landscapes that symbolize the nation. In the US, the West carries “a masculinized, conquered landscape, a landscape in which rugged individuals could achieve their destiny and create a new Eden”. This iconography carries a highly romanticized image of the American character or “Americanness”. As landscapes have a symbolic function, so do the characters. In Arthur Morgan’s character one can clearly observe this same ruggedness in his appearance and in the way he has conquered the Wild West as part of the Dutch van der Linde’s gang. Arthur’s dream is to settle in the West with the gang: buying a piece of

land for the gang and setting up a homestead and live there happily ever after in their own "Eden".

There is no definition for being an American, despite the title of this chapter. Two characteristics of meaning should be noted, especially when interpreting a concept that cannot be exhaustively explained. Firstly, meaning is never fixed, but is liable to change, and secondly, meaning is not merely the end product of the creator or "artist". An attempt to interpret the intention and thus discovering the 'correct' meaning of the author is not necessary for understanding some representation. Nevertheless, some meanings may be dominant or preferred (Hall 1980: 134).

For example, a writer of a video game is part of the wider culture in a distinct historical era and their works are therefore constructed within a certain cultural and historical framework they cannot escape. Yet at the same time, cultures change. Meanings cannot be permanently fixed. Representational systems change. We can only interpret the history from the era we are currently living in and only with the most recent ideas we have acquired about the world. We cannot remove ourselves from the culture that we are part of and which is part of us.

Arthur Morgan's character seems to some extent represent the cultural change. He feels at odds with the modern world, without a place and purpose. He is between a lost era and a new era. Being in-between two cultures and experiencing hybridity seems to be a something people find themselves in, especially today.

3 VIDEO GAMES AS A MEANING-MAKING DEVICE

This chapter will take a deeper look into video games as a subject of study. Firstly, I will introduce the representation studies as it is applied today into video game studies. Secondly, the chapter will propose how representation may be constructed in video game language both by the story and the character as this paper's aim is Arthur Morgan's character as a representation. This thesis cannot exhaustively examine these topics, but some relevant key ideas that have fueled my thesis will be discussed.

3.1 Representation studies and video games

Video games are still a novel area within the study of representation. To date, previous studies have examined more player representations, for example, the typical player's gender or ethnicity representations in game reviews or news articles. Some studies have focused on the content of the video games, examining representations of racial stereotypes, gender and sexual identities. (see Schmierbach 2009; Šisler 2008; Lewis & Griffiths 2011; Kondrat 2015; Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019; Gestos et al. 2018; Shaw 2009; Tompkins et al. 2020; Williams et al. 2009)

Lack of studies has prompted some researchers to formulate possible reasons behind this. Reichmuth and Werning have referred to video game and computer studies as "neglected media" (Reichmuth and Werning 2006: cited by Šisler 2008: 205). Their definition for *neglected media* is very similar to the on-going discussion among popular culture studies on when something becomes art and when it would rather

belong to the sphere of popular culture. Like popular culture, neglected media may be very appealing to large masses, also making it a high growing industry, but it has not been seen as important as “high culture” (see for example Edensor 2002: 3-4) and therefore the scientific coverage may be scarcer.

Reichmuth and Werning also claim that stereotypical representations may be produced more often in *neglected media* as it is not seen as relevant for cultural discourse, and therefore it is not of interest to media critique (Reichmuth and Werning 2006: cited by Šisler 2008: 205). On one hand, stereotypical representations are created when individualized representations are unavailable (Haslam et al. 1997: 208). On the other hand, gaming and games surface in public discussion periodically. Expert opinions are sought by laypeople to understand games and their significance, especially adverse effects they have on players. Representation has not so far received much media attention, but representational issues may be a rising interest among gaming community who discuss it sometimes on social platforms and create content around the subject.¹

3.2 Purpose of narrative in a video game: how game carries meaning

Representation depends on the discursive resources available, like all language-use. For example, representation of Americanness in a literary novel is expressed by literary resources available and chosen by the writer. Some of these resources are related to social agency, because resources are not distributed equally. Americanness may be expressed more often through a White male character and less often through a Hispanic male or female characters. Some writers may be shunned or their voice may be silenced from the discourse. (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 145) In video games, representation is the product of multimodal resources and multimodality is explained in the Methods section with more detail. As video games are a relatively new subject of

¹ For examples, see [YouTube](#).

study in many fields, I will explain some resources specifically relating to *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

Discourse studies establish narratives as utilizing both individual experiences and cultural narrative resources (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 144-145). In a way, narrative represents story events, interprets their significance. *Red Dead Redemption 2* is both a story of an individual, Arthur Morgan, and it also draws from cultural narrative resources, for example, stories that function as cautionary tale about the cycle of revenge and violence.

In a video game, players are pulled to another world and then they experience it with the main character. Narrative is thus drawn close to the player who becomes immersed in the story, and the game narrates human experience (Fludernik 2009: 6). Difficulties and obstacles that arise interest and cause emotions in the player also ensure they participate actively (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2011: 20). On a similar plane, Aristotle refers to *catharsis* (or *release*) which is marked by the power of change that storytelling can provide when life is experienced from someone else's perspective. Indeed, games offer a very unique way to become someone else in some other world and experience things otherwise inaccessible.

To conclude, games like *Red Dead Redemption 2* utilize several linguistic and discursive resources to engage the player and interact with them. These resources can be categorized as: 1. long tradition of story-telling style in which individual shares their life experiences, 2. cultural narrative resources that connect the language-use to a wider context of social community (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 144), 3. cathartic experiences which evoke deep primal emotions.

From a more technical perspective, video games can use the same linguistic resources available in real life from conversations to newspapers. *Cut scenes* literally 'cut' the playing experience (or *simulation*) and reverse the interaction between the player and the game. As the player normally decides the actions of the character as they interact with the game world, during cut scenes the game interacts with the character. Cut scenes change the narrative. The same characters return, but a new state of affairs is generated in the game world (Lavocat 2019 : 274-275). In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, cut scenes follow a cinematic, realistic style. The characters are also

played by real actors with motion capture technique, rendering the game more realistic.

Games also utilize *dialogues* between characters both on and off during cut scenes. Dialogues in general reveal relationships between characters and also shed light on their personality or nature.² Typically some written material about the world is also available, depending on the game genre or stylistic choices. In *Red Dead Redemption 2* the player may discover newspapers, books, diaries and letters. Arthur also carries his own diary in which he shares his thoughts about various events of the game that he typically does not share in dialogues with other characters.

² Tieteen termipankki: [Kirjallisuudentutkimus: dialogi](#). (23.3.2022)

4 PRESENT STUDY

The aim of the study was to examine how Arthur Morgan's character expresses Americanness. Is his character a sign that expresses the American identity and if so, what kind of meanings about American identity these signs carry?

The following section will introduce research questions that attempt to narrow down this aim. After the research questions, synopsis of the story will be presented in order to provide some context for the study. Finally, study methods will be discussed shortly.

4.1 Research questions

Since this study focuses on construction of Americanness, research questions focus on which symbols were used and what do they communicate.

1. Which linguistic, semiotic and visual symbols are used to construct 'Americanness' in Arthur's character?
2. What kind of meanings this representation implies about 'Americanness'?

Americanness as a concept is derived from previous studies of representation. In Stuart Hall's *Cultural representation and signifying practices* (1997), this topic is explored in the way humanist photography represented *Frenchness* during the post-war reconstruction in 1944-1950. Photography was not simply recording the moment in time, but it

also constructed the France and the French of the time. Photographers and the press had to make choices and those choices could not be made without any influence of their personal values or ethics. (Hall 1997: 76-77) These choices are part of the process that creates representations and fixes the meaning to specific signs, as was discussed earlier in 2.1.

4.2 Data

Before I will explain my choice of data, I will introduce the game's main story and events that are central to Arthur. Story provides an important context for the representations in the game: why particular representations were chosen. Since the game is set in 1899, the historical period will have an effect on the American identity representation. This synopsis will give a rough outline of the main events and will also include the ending for Arthur.

4.2.1 Story synopsis for Arthur's character

The story is set in Northern America of the 1899, an era that the game defines as the end of the Wild West. Former outlaws are hunted by the government. They want to move onto a new, more advanced and "civilized" era, despite exploiting quite uncivil methods to reach this end. Dutch's Boys, the gang that is led by the charismatic Dutch van der Linde and Hosea Matthews, is one the gangs the government wants to get rid of.

The game begins on snowy mountains that the gang has escaped law. A robbery went awry. Some members of the gang have been killed, while the whereabouts of the rest are unknown. The gang has to find some means to survive, but they are constantly hunted. As robbery after robbery is going wrong, suspicions begin to rise: is there an informant in the gang? The leader Dutch van der Linde becomes more and more paranoid and seems to have lost grip on reality, and this worries Arthur. Arthur is a man in his thirties that was essentially raised by Dutch and Hosea from a young age. Arthur is like a son to them and due to his experience, also high on the gang's hierarchy, like a big brother to the other "boys".

After a midpoint in game, Arthur is diagnosed with tuberculosis and he has little time left. Arthur's perspective on life changes. He contemplates the life he has lived and the regrets of outlaw life begin to weigh on his conscience. Arthur devotes rest of his remaining life to make sure that other people in the gang can live on as the government agents seek to finish the gang for good. Arthur eventually succeeds, and depending on the choices of the player, he can die calmly watching the rising sun or be executed by the antagonist gang member, Micah Bell. The player may have inadvertently "killed" Arthur for multiple times before in the game, but this time his character does not reawaken.

After his death, the game skips ten years ahead and the player is now playing as John Marston, another gang member and the main character of the previous *Red Dead Redemption* game. Even though the story continues with John to its final ending, Arthur's legacy lives on and is present in the epilogue as well. Arthur's dream of saving people important to him became true, alluding to the game title's '*redemption*'.

4.2.2 Cut scenes and dialogues

I collected my data from cut scenes and character dialogues. Main criteria for analyzing some scenes closer was whether they revealed American values or details in Arthur's character. I re-watched cut scenes and dialogues from YouTube, reviewed wiki pages online and also re-played some content of the game. Game clips are available on video services like YouTube and missions can be freely re-played after completing them.

Some dialogues are transcribed and included in the findings section. The transcription is more ideational than conversation analytical (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 238). Since the focus is on the representation of American identity, subtle social conversation markers are not necessary to draw conclusions. Therefore I don't think there is much benefit in detailed transcriptions.

4.3 Methods of analysis

Analysis was guided by the approach of qualitative research to describe, understand and explain empirical evidence “arising” from the data (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 245). As qualitative research provides rich description of the subject of study and is also context-bound, identity representation can be explored in-depth. Representation study relies on qualitative approach (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 210).

One could roughly generalize that quantitative research aims to draw conclusions from a wide number of manifestation of the phenomenon it strives to uncover, whereas qualitative research focuses on gathering enough observations of the phenomenon in order to create a rich, detailed account. This point is also known as the point of saturation. Once it is reached, gathering more data is not necessary, since observations begin to repeat themselves. (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 237) In the context of this study, for example, describing and classifying every possible utterance that could reveal Arthur’s sociolinguistic background is not important, since few well-chosen examples already provide rich material for analysis and answer the questions set in the beginning.

Since the context of the data can be found in a video game, multimodal (or ‘*multisemiotic*’) discourse analysis was also examined. Representations are construed in discourses and they rely on multiple resources to communicate meaning. These other semiotic resources communicate meaning *with* the language. This communication occurs via multiple senses (*modalities*). It is therefore important to include in analysis data that can be categorized as visual, for example, chosen appearance for the character and auditory data, for example, varieties of English. (O’Halloran 2011: 120-121)

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings and relevant discussion is organized into four main sections. Firstly, I will discuss American values that Arthur expresses (or does not), then the focus will be on 1) his Southern State accent, 2) his clothing, and 3) his most important possessions that stand for an American idea about freedom.

5.1 American values under discussion

Values are seen as something that is shared by the people from the same culture in general, or what is at least presented as the ideal in the said culture. U.S. Department of State's material lists American values on their site as a guide for Americans that are asked abroad on what being an American means.³ This listing is a part of a course for Americans to communicate better about their home country and their values. They list eleven values: independence, equality, individualism, democracy, nationalism, meritocracy, directness, innovation, consumerism, informality, and efficient use of time. Since this page is one of the first Google search finds and also a government source, I used this list as a basis for comparing Arthur's values with it. Under the heading American values is a link to a PDF with full descriptions.⁴

³ [Understanding Your Own Culture. American values and their Influence.](#) U.S. Department of State's Foreign Service Institute. Accessed 28.5.2022.

⁴ [American Values.](#) U.S. Department of State's Foreign Service Institute. Accessed 28.5.2022.

5.1.1 Equality

Arthur does not oppose equality in his interactions with different characters, even though he makes it sure that he is more interested in making money than being charitable helper in general. Since the game is set in 1899, a time in which women's rights movement was developing in America, Arthur meets some women's suffrage advocates. As a part of a mission, Arthur ends up driving a wagon for women protesting in a small town of Rhodes. When he is complimented for lending his help to the protest, he makes a self-depreciating comment about males in general:

(1)

Ms. Calhoon: Mr. Morgan, I give you the male of the species.

Arthur: That's a pretty dumb specimen, I grant it.

(Mission "The Course of True Love - III")

When Arthur is asked whether he thinks women should be allowed to vote, he does not object:

(2)

Arthur: Women voting? Sure, why not!

NPC: Oh, thank you sir. You are a true progressive.

Arthur: Anyone dumb enough to wanna vote, I'd say, go for it.

NPC: Oh, a cynic. How dull for you. I do hope you grow out of it young man. It's so unappealing.

Arthur: Unappealing is what I do best!

(during a chance encounter in Saint Denis)

This scene illustrates Arthur's thoughts about democracy. He does not see political candidates as very reliable. American freedom of thought includes also criticism of political candidates and expressing opinions that disparage democracy are tolerated. It is believed that when the constitution gives greater freedom for the people, the country is less likely be overtaken by tyranny.

5.1.2 Independence

Independence was established in the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Independence and self-sufficiency is seen as a way to enjoy life and experience it to the fullest by creating “a fulfilling life for oneself and one’s family.” (U.S. Department of State: Independence. n.d.) Arthur places high value on the well-being of the gang and motivates others to be more self-sufficient by teaching them to hunt, fish or become better at their criminal activities. He seeks freedom granted to him in the constitution, but is at the same time a wanted man pursued by the government. Arthur perceives this as a threat to his independence, but also accepts the change of time and values, stating to Dutch that “we’re thieves in a world that don’t want us no more” and “our time has come to pass”.

5.1.3 Individualism

Arthur sees himself as a member of the gang, but it is important to consider that the gang is also like a family. Individual goals of the gang, like competing with rival gangs like the O’ Driscolls or settling in the West, become goals for Arthur as well. He begins to question the gang’s decisions, but he does not pursue his own happiness, if it means abandoning the weaker members of the gang. Arthur even rejects his former lover’s offer to escape with her during the mission *Fatherhood and Other Dreams*, alluring to Arthur’s own dreams in life. This is possibly the most individualist choice Arthur could make for himself, yet he passes her offer, because he wants to make sure some members in the gang are safe first. U.S. Department of State’s material also points out that Americans do not wish to practice individualism to the point of causing harm for others.

The gang culture restricts individualism of its members to some degree and also violence, loan sharking and robberies limit individualism of outsiders or rival gangs. Gangs compete with each other and it sometimes leads to violence and death. The life as an outlaw later leads Arthur to contemplate on what kind of a man he is. One could say that Arthur’s individuality is controlled, even though he makes his own mind and chooses to protect the gang, but a part of him also wishes to leave.

(3)

Arthur: Nothin' means more to me than this gang. I would kill for it. I would happily die for it. I wish things were different... But it weren't us who changed.

(To John in the mission "The Bridge to Nowhere")

Arthur's character reveals the downside of blind loyalty and believing in someone just for the sake of believing in them. Arthur advises John Marston to "be loyal to what matters" and by this he means John's own family and the hope that they could at least build a normal life together without the gang. As Arthur does not look only for his own survival, he is also cautioning us what would happen if we would abandon loyalty altogether for the sake of individualism alone.

(4)

Arthur: You been loyal, I been loyal. Look what that caused. You know, all that ever mattered to me was loyalty. It was all I knew. It was all I ever believed in.

(To John in the mission: "The Bridge to Nowhere")

Cowboy of a Western story is an icon of individualism itself: an individual that also provides for or protects the community, but acts outside the community paving their own individual path. Cowboy is like a metaphor for an American with their individual aspirations that are balanced with being part of the community. They are 'lawless' heroes that are ultimately for the 'law' or for the moral good. Typically cowboys are solitary figures that disappear after their heroic acts. Cowboys seem to balance individualism and selfless actions and according to material by U.S. Department of State, ideally American individualism is practiced similarly. There are concerns that social cohesion has ruptured in America according to some social critics (U.S. Department of State: Individualism. n.d.). Such criticism has been part of critical sociology reviews for decades, for example, Jules Henry (1965: 5-8 cited by Hauhart 2016: 136) asserts that "—a commitment to individualism that left Americans solitary and lonely as people—".

Arthur also takes part in missions in which he helps people he does not know and in some side missions the player can decide whether they will help a stranger or not, for example, giving a horse ride to a stranger to a town, absolving their debts to

the gang, saving a stranger from wild wolves' attack, saving kidnapped people or taking a dying man to a doctor. The game mechanic rewards the player with high honor in these occasions, and actions that lead to harm for innocent strangers lower Arthur's honor rate if the player so decides.

5.1.4 Nationalism

"Due to America's geographic isolation and global influence, the average American is not well-informed about international current events except those which may be shown in newspaper headlines and on the nightly television news." (U.S. Department of State: Nationalism n.d.)

This lack of information about the world outside the borders of the US becomes observable when Arthur meets foreign people. He comes across, for example, Polish and German immigrants, an adventurer that is travelling around the world, a French artist, few foreign scientists, and a British travelling entertainer. In all these encounters, Arthur is either puzzled by their weird behavior or amused by their lives in general, finding them more or less nonsensical. Some of these characters serve the purpose of comedic relief.

When Arthur arrives in Guarma, he is surprised by the civil war. He also does not have any knowledge about Tahiti, yet the gang considers the possibility to escape the law into this foreign paradise of mango trees. Possibly such exotic, faraway places serve to ignite their imaginations of a better life. When they discover firsthand the reality of life in Guarma in Chapter 5, they also discover that there is no escaping of the U.S. government and those who have wealth and power.

Arthur does not speak any other languages, except a few Spanish words like '*vamos*'. During a conversation with a German character, he discusses other languages and his own knowledge of them.

(5)

Arthur: How did someone even come up with them words?

Man: *speaks German*

Arthur: Look I'm sorry, friend, I can barely speak English.

(Mission "A Strange Kindness")

Arthur's response is not that untypical, for an average American is monolingual. Even though speaking a second language is valued, it is not commonplace. Ideologically, monolingual English has driven US language policy making for a long time in US history. (Leeman 2018)

5.1.5 Meritocracy

Arthur does not pay much respect to titles and is not interested in the accomplishments of the higher society that have been earned through inheritance, for example. One could say that Arthur strongly identifies with his work as an outlaw and with all that being an outlaw entails, like an average American strongly defines themselves with the work they do.

5.1.6 Directness

Instances of directness were very frequent and a typical style of communicating for Arthur. He expresses himself with confidence and keeps strong eye contact with his interlocutors. Arthur does not shy away from conflicts or criticizing openly his fellow gang members, when necessary. Arthur openly critiques even Dutch's decisions which is possible partly in due to him being the second-in-command in the gang's hierarchy, but egalitarianism can also lead to Americans treating their superiors with less deference than is typical in other cultures (U.S. State of Department: Informality n.d.). He does not hide his personal sentiments when asked about them and his straight-forwardness makes him honest, another aspect why directness may be valued in American society.

5.1.7 Innovation

He does not particularly innovate per se, and prefers good old-fashioned robbing. When he is questioned about being part of a train robbery, he tries to hide his identity by lying: "Ain't train robberies a little old fashioned nowadays?"

5.1.8 Consumerism

Arthur does have some items and it is possible to buy more items. He carries a couple of personal mementos with him. Arthur also gains money during the game, which allows him to update his wardrobe with more expensive item or buy a faster, more expensive horse, if he so wishes.

5.1.9 Informality

Arthur does not pay much respect to appearances. He dresses often in jeans, worn boots, a leather jacket and a Stetson-type of hat. He changes his clothing to a more formal one on only two occasions: when he enters a party at the Major's house and goes to a gambling event. In these events, he is very uncomfortable as he feels a little too fancy.

Arthur often feels at odds with 'civilization' which basically refers to a modernized society of the early 20th century. He is strongly against moving more towards the East and would prefer to remain in the simple land in the West that is also more informal and not structured by social elites like the city of Saint Denis, for example.

Also, he does not usually refer to people by their titles with the odd occasion of referring to Miss Grimshaw as a Miss instead of her first name Susan. Miss Grimshaw is Arthur's senior and one in charge of everyday chores in the gang and she especially oversees that women work and support the camp. Arthur possibly holds her in high regard for the hard work she does. Arthur does refer to other women in the camp by the title and first name, for example, Miss Mary-Beth or Miss Tilly. As he is slightly more formal towards women, it could point towards ideals of so-called gentlemanly behavior and being respectful towards women. He also removes his hat when speaking to his former fiancée and looks more after his appearance (checking his teeth, for example). As was discussed in 5.1.1. Arthur does not hold males in high regard, which could be because his father was violent towards him and his mother and in Arthur's own words, his father did not die soon enough. Being raised by his mother could have made him more sympathetic towards women in general.

5.1.10 Efficient use of time

Arthur does not work in typical industry with a strict schedule and working shifts. Industrialization has affected the lives of side characters that work in factories or in the mining industry. Arthur does like to plan robberies and other criminal activities and the best way to accomplish gang's tasks.

5.2 American English

As the player rides into town as Arthur, Arthur may greet townspeople with "Howdy" or "Ma'am, behind you". Arthur's vocabulary and pronunciation could be described as "Western speak", something that appears in Westerns and is formulaic in the genre. Further research would be needed on Western speak in order to establish the vocabulary and other markers that are typical for this language variation with the aid of multiple sources. As this thesis focuses on Arthur, I will give examples from his vocabulary that establish the connection between Americanness as it is represented in linguistic choices.

Arthur's vocabulary is easy to understand. If 'Western phrases' were used more, the player might have difficulties of access and actually following the story. In his vocabulary, the word choices reflect American speech, but they do not venture too far into distinct, old and hard-to-understand word choices, which is a "bee in your bonnet"; the player may otherwise have their "hair in the butter".⁵

His accent reminds a bit Southern accent, but does not entirely match with it. American flair is very apparent. Arthur's character is not from South and since he has travelled a lot with the gang from a young age, it could be argued that his way of speaking was influenced by many different varieties of English. Arthur's voice actor Roger Clark is Irish-American and he reveals in an interview with Geek Culture that he was going for a "Southern and Texan vibe" for Arthur's accent.⁶ His accent does

⁵ *bee in a bonnet*: a good idea. *hair stuck in the butter*: to be stuck in a tricky situation (Source: [Top 100 Cowboy Expressions and Phrases \(Colorado Trails Ranch\)](#) Accessed 31.3.2022)

⁶ [Red Dead Redemption 2's Voice Actors On Performance Capture, Accents, Starting A Voice-Acting Career & More \(Geek Culture\)](#) Accessed 31.3.2022.

emphasize the fact that American people have their roots in Europe and they are a varied group of people in general. Interestingly, the choice to pick Southern and Texan accents reveals something about the choices made in representation; Arthur's character has been created with the Southern culture in mind. Indeed, it is not a long stretch of imagination to imagine your stereotypical Texan (or Southerner) as a cowgirl or a cowboy or vice versa, cowgirl or cowboy that happen to be also Texans (or Southerners). From this, it could be argued that the representation of "Americanness" in Arthur is a very Southern one at that.

Arthur's relationship with English and other languages was discussed previously shortly in 5.1.4. Nationalism. Arthur was quoted saying "I barely speak English". This remark may also reveal some underlying insecurity of his self-image as an English speaker. Having less resources as a language-user than others can lead to othering and exclusive practices. Southerners are sometimes portrayed through negative stereotypes in the media, but Arthur's character seems to escape these representations (Slade et al. 2012: 9-). He is after all the main character and seems to be a representation that creates a more positive image of a Southern character. As a main character, he is presented as an individual with multiple facets and in this way, he does not behave like a stereotypical character might. As Haslam et al. theorized (1997: 208), stereotypes are formed when individual characteristics are not available, and hence more individual characteristics can make for less stereotypical representations. Southern representation could also be understood as a sub-code. Sub-code takes on an additional dimension of cultural coding, for example, Americanness. (Hall 1980: 133)

Arthur's comment about his English skills may imply the player about his social background. He has not received any formal education, but he is also not illiterate as he was taught to read by Hosea Matthews (another main member in the gang). He also does not seem to have any considerable issues communicating with others.

5.3 What's a cowboy without his hat?

Arthur dresses like a typical Western character. (see visual examples in Appendix 1) Even though his wardrobe can be customized by the player, the available clothing

choices and default clothing are loyal to the time period present in the game. Western stories are typically set in the 1800s. His clothing gains its meaning in this specific context of a Western genre. In any other context, his clothing would create a very different impression. His clothes could be worn today and they would not necessarily stand out from the crowd, except for the cowboy hat and boots with stirrups, yet even they would not challenge our expectations if we were visiting a Western horse racing event.

The interpretation that his clothing is typical for a Western character, is dependent on how familiar the interpreter is with the genre and therefore the context of the genre. (See an example of visual similarities with Clint Eastwood's Western character in Appendix 1) Following the outline of interpretation process made by Pietikäinen & Mäntynen (2019: 37-38), interpretation process begins with the sign (clothing) that is bound by context(s). In context, meaning of the sign is negotiated. Following this line of deduction, one could say that in the context of Westerns, Arthur's clothing reflects the tradition of Western stories. Western stories, on the other hand, reflect the lifestyle of average Americans in the 19th - early 20th century. As many worked at ranches and outside the entire day, functional and durable clothing was needed. Those having higher status and/or income, may have dressed in boots made of more exquisite leather, for example.

Genres provide norms, and in other words, normalize social behavior (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 114). This led me to consider the connection between representations and genres. Representations as social signs are utilized in different genres, for example, a Western character may appear in video games, movies or novels, but genres also seem to restrict representations. Representation that does not fit the norms provided by the genre, like a Western hero in a story that is set in modern sci-fi, challenges our expectations of the genre entirely. Genre conventions can also be negotiated and re-arranged.⁷ (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019: 114)

⁷ Challenging the boundaries of genres can be a resource, for example, *Cowboy Bebop* is a well-known anime that mixed sci-fi and Western genres, and *Red Dead Undead* has mixed zombie stories and Westerns. *Red Dead Undead* is part of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead* video game franchise.

Another context to consider is the context of a video game. In a video game, his clothing is part of the experience of immersing the gamer into the game world by realistic details.

5.4 Horses and guns and to live as free men

Horses have a long tradition of representing freedom. Wild horses running in a prairie is quite the most romantic image one can have about West, and this sight is very often encountered in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Wild animals may symbolize ultimate freedom from all constraints, which can be represented by cages, halters, leashes. Nature that is untamed or not controlled by humans is seen as natural co-existence, being in a state that the world was meant to be in, but also as dangerous, a place where the law cannot catch or restrict any being. Nature's law is the only law in the wilderness.

In the game mechanic, wild horses can be tamed through calmness and kindness and being responsive to any signals of fear. As the game is set before the era of vehicles, horses are important for travelling any distances. Horses were the loyal friends of solitary cowboys riding for months on end without human company. This special relationship between the cowboy and his horse is carried into *Red Dead Redemption 2*. It is impossible to play the game without Arthur's horse and his horse may be one of the most important possessions for him. Arthur and the other gang members have their own horse and they become irreplaceable:

(6)

Hosea: So, you still ain't replaced Boadicea?

Arthur: Nah, I miss her, she was quite a horse. This one's okay, but ain't no Boadicea.

(Mission "Exit Pursued by a Bruised Ego")

In the final mission that Arthur appears in (mission "Red Dead Redemption"), as he is pursued by dozens of lawmen, his horse is fatally injured and can no longer stand up. Arthur stops to pet and calm his dying horse and thanks them. As much as Arthur's horse has depended on him, Arthur has depended on his horse. Like the free

horse that is captured, the Wild West is hunted down by the law. This scene of dying horse foreshadows Arthur's death during the same mission and the end of the Wild West in the game.

Arthur comes to own a large repertoire of guns, as one would expect from a Western hero attempting to survive in the Wild West. Arthur hardly refers to his guns in dialogues, but he is always carrying them along with other weapons. Guns seem to be an integral part of Arthur that cannot be separated from him and something that is easily overlooked, as it is so obvious that it needs no explanation. He showcases his shooting skills during some missions, side missions and the game features also quick-drawing. Good headshots are sometimes re-played during missions by a slowed down cut scene that shows Arthur carefully aiming the target. Arthur often performs very quick and precise shots during critical moments of the game. Arthur's gunmanship is therefore brought to the center of the representation.

Guns are also associated with freedom: *gun freedom* is something that is seen by gun rights advocates as an inherent right that a free society should promote. More reserved stances refer to guns by *gun control*, which implies that something is out of control and needs to be contained or managed.

Independency, as understood in the American value system, also resists government from interfering and restricting in any way the independency of people in U.S. Bill of Rights. Right to gun ownership is also singled out in the US Constitution in the Second Amendment that reads, "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, **the right of the people to keep and bear Arms**, shall not be infringed."⁸ Although the constitutional right of this amendment is debated and whether it refers to state rights or individual rights, the gun ownership and whether it is part of American freedom or not, is part of the on-going discourse on what freedom is or should be. A society that makes gun ownership relatively easy could be a reason why Arthur's gunmanship is such a normalized issue. It does not need to be explained, because it is so commonplace. Guns can be accessed while Arthur rides into near-by town to go into a saloon, buys some groceries and then visits the local

⁸ [U.S. Constitution. Second Amendment](#). Accessed 28.4.2022.

gun shop. As was discussed in 3.2, Edensor referred to nationalism being present in ordinary every-day practices. Perhaps Arthur's Americanness is present in his freedom. Since freedom is represented by gun ownership, it may point towards the reason why it is such a highly-debated issue in the contemporary America.

6 CONCLUSION

Representation of national identity is theorized as something that reflects prevailing values and a mythical story of a nation. Some findings support this theory. Some values were more pronounced than others. Clashes between individualism and the community, or state and individual, have long had their place in the formation of American identity. The game had multiple signs for Americanness. Some of the signs required more contextual knowledge like knowledge of genres. However, Western cowboy representation, which itself is an American icon, was very important for his character. Arthur's story is the continuation of this iconic character. As genres are organized and well-established use of language or signs, they seem to produce strong representations, because representation requires coding and encoding continuously. Perhaps changes in the genre in general could point towards changes in society in general. Thesis also briefly touched upon stereotyping of Americans in the Southern States and studying these representations more could be socially important.

This thesis has its restrictions and some possible examples of Western cowboy genre in Arthur's character were not possible noticed, because I may lack knowledge of the genre myself. Some of the limits and liabilities of reliability can be attributed to interpretation. For example, same dialogues could be interpreted differently or from other perspective by other researchers. Theoretical concepts used in this thesis are also debated often in general, identity being one example. Among game studies, some ludologists could possibly criticize representation studies or language studies in general as unsuitable approaches to games that need to be understood on their own terms.

These criticisms may be valid and they could point towards problems that this type of study should work to resolve in the future.

Red Dead Redemption 2 is like a micro cosmos portraying many different groups of characters. For further research, it would be interesting to collect more representations of the game as the game has plenty of interesting characters to choose from. Female characters, Native American characters or Dutch's charismatic speeches may interest future students or researchers. Arthur's character could also be explored from various angles, for example, his masculinity could be of interest. Another perspective could focus on fictional historicization and how past is re-built in a popular work of the 2010's. New historical re-enactments reveal how past is interpreted today.

Since games are a common pastime and at the peak of their popularity, examining them is in itself important. Representations also reveal symbolism around us every day that is easily taken for granted or is something we do not stop to reflect upon in our daily lives, despite their tenacity and on-going production around our respective cultures. As Hall has noted, national identity representations are relatively stable in comparison to others. It was interesting that Arthur's character carried same symbolism that has been at the heart of Americanness for decades or in some cases even centuries. Perhaps indeed *Red Dead Redemption 2* is part of this process of creating stability for those identifying as Americans in the 21st century.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 - VISUAL REPRESENTATION



Arthur's default outfit called 'the Gunslinger'



Arthur's visuals resemble Clint Eastwood's classic characters. He only lacks his cigarette.