

Sites of Play: Locating Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*

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ABSTRACT

In *Video Game Spaces* (2009), Michael Nitsche proposes three indicators of ‘placeness’ in video games: identity, self-motivated and self-organised action, and traces of memory (191-201). We read this notion of placeness as closely aligned to, or overlapping with, the understandings of place and site articulated in theatre and performance research as *site-specific performance*. Here, we articulate the ideas (and analyse the experiences) of placeness and sitedness in Rockstar Games’ *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) through an analytical conversation between performance studies and games design research with a human-computer interaction bias. Through a close-reading of gameplay experiences (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011), we individually experienced over 30 hours of *RDR2* gameplay while taking notes, recording, and capturing screenshots. During our individual analyses, we met periodically to compare notes, discuss notable game moments and share analytical insights. At this intersection of game research and performance research, we ask to what extent the theoretical articulations of aesthetic/affective experience in physical, corporeal and material spaces can develop – and further nuance – our understanding of how place is experienced (and thus designed) in contemporary videogames. In doing so, we propose the term *gameplace* as a means of articulating what this article will define as the affective relationship between place, experience and play.

Keywords

Place, space, placeness, gameworld, gameplay, performance research, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Site-Specific Performance

For scholars and practitioners in the discipline, site-specific performance refers to ‘performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world (ergo, outside the established theatre)’ (Pavis, 1998, p.337). At a more fundamental level, to create site-specific performance is to ‘create work in response to place, rather than to use site as a quirk of production’ (Wrights and Sites, 2001). The conceptual genealogy of this performance mode traces back to the large-scale land and environmental art of the

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

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1960s and 1970s and – perhaps – as far as the Dadaist ‘excursions’ of the 1920s: ‘anti-touristic visits to places that had struck their organisers as lacking any reason for existing’ (Smith, 2019). In the case of the former, paradigm-defining works like Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), James Turrell’s *Roden Crater* (1979), and the extensive canon of Christo and Jeanne-Claude (1961-2009) were all symptomatic of a youthful, art-school-eschewing, eco-centric resistance to an increasingly commercialised, increasingly urban, and increasingly *exclusive* art market. Theirs was the desire to not merely *depict* a landscape, but to *engage* it; art not *of* the landscape, but *in* and *from* it as well (Beardsley, 1998, p.7).

Seemingly inevitably, the idea of artwork which exists both *in* and *from* the engagement of place further extended from the domain of the static/land artist to the realm of live performance. Pioneers of site-specific performance – artists and collectives such as Brith Gof, Lone Twin, Janet Cardiff and Wrights and Sites – all continued to grapple with the land artists’ commitment to ‘engagement’ with place, and in doing so, the proliferation of site-specific work from the 1980s onwards developed with it a rigorous criticality that sought to differentiate site-specific work from what might otherwise crudely be called ‘outside theatre’ (encapsulated perfectly by something like Shakespeare-in-the-Park). In the site-specific work, in contrast to the site-generic, ‘layers of the site are revealed through reference to: historical documentation, site usage (past and present), found text, objects, actions, sounds, etc. anecdotal guidance, personal association, half-truths and lies, [and] site morphology’ (Wrights and Sites, 2001). Across both rural and urban environments, site-specific performance attempts to think about – and make more visible – the complex fabrics of public, social, and commercial space – of how we live and live together, of place as a kind of ‘palimpsest’ layered with history, multiple in meaning (Kaye, 2000; Turner, 2004).

Scholars of theatre and performance, therefore, required a revised (and in some cases entirely new) vocabulary and set of analytical tools to understand and explain this expanded lexicon of performance practices. In short, the dialogic relationship between *what* happens and *where* became the *de facto* critical lens of the site-specific artist and researcher – what Clifford McLucas (in relation to the work of Mike Pearson and Brith Gof) calls a *placeevent*, where ‘a place and what is built there bleed into each other and constitute another order of existence’ (McLucas 1996 cited in Kaye, 2000, p.56).

Critical to McLucas’ *placeevent* is a clear ontological differentiation (‘a place and what is built there’) between *place* and *space*, and it is in that difference that our initial proposition about the *place* of videogames emerges. Phenomenologically speaking, the difference between *place* and *space* is a fundamentally human one – that is to say, that *space becomes* place at the point at which it is filled, or woven through, with *human connections* (Tuan, 1977). The proposition here, then, is that if games are (at the very least) cultural artefacts capable of producing artistic and/or aesthetic experience, generating affect, or making meaning, then games which exist in *places* (that is, digital or virtual space navigable by or layered with human social threads) can be understood as site-specific encounters¹.

If this is indeed the case, then analysis of videogames which construct large parts of player experience *through* experiences of place, landscape, or site would inevitably benefit from the well-developed critical framework developed in the discipline of site-specific performance studies. Following Ian Bogost’s suggestion in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (2006), such an analysis would productively shift the focus of analysis from how games work, to ‘what they do – how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity’. It would, as he argues ‘focus principally on the expressive capacity of games’ and ask in what ways they ‘relate to, participate in, extend and revise the cultural expression at work in other kinds of

artifacts’ (2006, p.54). The analysis then, asks – of the ‘expressive capacity of games’ – about the possible connections between place and experience as understood by site-specific performance, and the ‘place’ of videogames; what we would like to call *gameplace*.² Our experience and analysis of *RDR2* is one in which *gameplace* is a crucial compositional element in the generation of affect, emotional response, and the development of player/game narrative.

Players & Spectators

Perhaps the most striking *formal* connection between site-specific performance and the videogame lies in the conception of the subject: in performance, the *spectator*; in games, the *player*. As Fernández-Vara notes, in videogames ‘the player is a necessary part of the text [...] as the game is not really a complete text without a player that interprets its rules and interacts with it’ (Fernández-Vara, 2014, p.7). That each player is her or his own nuanced and entirely unique subject is not in doubt, and the work of Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter (2009), Ruberg & Shaw (2014, 2017), Murray (2018), and Malkowski & Russberg (2017) has demonstrated a complex critical attendance to not only what is played, but *who is playing and how*.

In theatre and performance (at the very least in the UK), it was not until Susan Bennett’s 1997 *Theatre Audiences* that any serious and sustained attention was given to the position, individual agency, or indeed *impact* of the spectator. It had been widely assumed, as Bennett argued, that ‘with the exception of the first forty years of the nineteenth century’ (and following the removal of pits for stalls – that is, the removal of standing areas for seating in 1850), ‘audiences became increasingly passive and increasingly bourgeois’ (Bennett, 1997, p.3). Theatre audiences, at least in the context of academic scholarship, had been improperly thought of as a kind of homogenous block, ‘imaginatively necessary, but critically unconsidered’ (Robinson, 2004, p.3). As Helen Freshwater points out in *Theatre & Audience* (2009) ‘the common tendency to refer to an audience as ‘it’ and, by extension, to think of this ‘it’ as a single entity, or a collective’, risks obscuring the multiple contingencies of subjective response, context, and environment which condition an individual’s interpretation of a particular performance event’ (2009, p.5).

In site-specific performance, by contrast to the dimly-lit auditoriums of mainstream British theatres, audiences are not only *visibly* present as unique, individual agents (and in some cases as an audience-of-one), but acknowledged by Mike Pearson as an integral part of the triangulation of ‘an *activity*, an *audience* and a *place*’. The ‘texts’ of site-specific work, argues Pearson, ‘reside in the multiple creative articulations of *us*, *them*, and *there*’ (Pearson, 2010, p.19), and ask fundamental questions of the visitation of place (‘who am I and what am I doing?’, ‘Am I a stranger or an inhabitant?’, ‘In what guise do I visit?’) (ibid). Such is the interdependency of that triangulation between activity, audience and place in site-specific work, that the subtle taxonomy Pearson provides is important not only for the artist (and thus the artwork), but also those that view, visit or encounter the site in which the artist is working or has worked.

The set of relationships present in the creation, experience, and critical understanding of site-specific performance: framed by *place*, our activities *in it* and our responses *to it*, echoes Fernández-Vara’s construction of the videogame player as a ‘necessary part of the text’, and moreover, appears fundamentally no different to the ‘complete diagetic universe’ offered by open world games and their attendant narrative systems (Humphreys, 2012, p.201). Indeed, (and by way of scholarly precedent) Soraya Murray, in *High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing “Grand Theft Auto”* (2005), identifies the crucial nature of place in the overall experience of Rockstar’s *Grand Theft*

Auto: San Andreas (2004), even going so far as to argue that games are no less a ‘space of performance and play just because they do not occupy “lived” environments’ (2005, p.96). She writes:

With *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, a player is responsible to an increased degree for a simulated body that requires food and exercise, that can be clothed and adorned with tattoos and hairstyles. This is a body that shifts with varying stimuli such as a healthy versus junk food diet. (It becomes significant to note that in CJ’s neighborhood, like many underserved inner-city areas, the only three restaurants in town offer fast food: burgers, fried-chicken, or pizza.) This is a body that adapts based on aerobic versus strength building exertions, whose driving skills and attractiveness to the opposite sex increase with experiences, or whose stomach bloats with overeating.

(ibid)

What has been created in *San Andreas*, as Murray explains, is a *gameplace* in which ‘the poor black male body, which is encoded as a human stain on the fabric of a squeaky-clean American dream of opportunity’ has been pushed, through the player’s negotiated interactions with place – with *site* – ‘into the centre of our attention’ (ibid). CJ’s world, a compressed amalgam of Los Angeles’ South Bay (Idlewood / Inglewood) and South Downtown areas (Ganton / Compton), creates an experience for the player that echoes the visual landscape of ‘1990s genre ‘hood films like *Colors* (1988), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993)’ (ibid, 92). As a cultural artefact, it ‘represents a compelling human-computer encounter between informational space and lived space’ and, through our actions and experiences in that site, generates a ‘potent social critique’ (ibid). That such a critique emerges is evidence of a concatenation of *gameplay*: what we do; the actions and tasks performed within the parameters of the game, and *gameplace*: the codifying environment that gives broader cultural meaning and depth of experience *to those actions*.

GO WEST, YOUNG MAN

Rockstar Games’ *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) creates, like *San Andreas*, a dynamic *gameplace* in which site and landscape are crucial components in how we understand, experience and interpret it as a cultural artefact. It employs the four modes of environmental storytelling suggested by Henry Jenkins (2004): evocative spaces, enacting stories, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives. The interweaving of these narrative tactics enhances the vibrancy and believability of the game world while, as a permanent backdrop, mediated understandings of ‘The Wild West’ as a place permeates the player’s every encounter. The different regions in the game evoke archetypal environments of the southern states from Louisiana swamps to Texan oilfields (*evocative spaces*), and these environmental features form a kind of background reference point, attuning the players to expect actions, activities, events, locales and architectures common to the Western genre (*enacting stories*). The myriad of seemingly tangential micronarratives – such as side-quests and random roadside encounters – always refer either to the history of the place in which they unfold, or to current events happening elsewhere (*embedded narratives*). These story beats embedded in the gameworld – together with those of the main story – form a coherent whole, even though the narrative information is spatially distributed and requires non-trivial effort from the players to unravel. Lastly, the dynamic nature of the game environment and the freedom of the player’s activities give rise to emergent narratives from hunting animals to the pillaging of randomly encountered homesteads. The

combination of these four modes of environmental storytelling creates a gameworld with vast narrative potential and is crucial to the ways in which *RDR2* creates its sense of place.

Throughout, *RDR2* speaks to American history in a similar vernacular to that of its predecessor, 2010s *Red Dead Redemption* (*RDR* – of which *RDR2* is a prequel). As Sara Humphreys observes, *RDR* constructs (through the lens of its central protagonist John Marston) a rendering of ‘authentic US identity [defined] in terms of whiteness, rugged masculinity and heteronormativity’ (Humphreys, 2012, p.204). Far from the playful-yet-incisive social critique of *San Andreas*, *RDR* performs ‘ideologies centred on conforming to neoliberal values’, and is ‘part of the narrative apparatuses that dramatize neoliberalism through one of its most powerful conduits: the popular Western’ (ibid, 210) And yet, *pace* Humphreys, and in spite of what she calls an implicit support for and re-rehearsal of narratives of ‘exceptionalism, neoliberalism, and even white supremacy’, *Red Dead Redemption* was (and is) heralded by an overwhelming number of commentators as an industry-defining success: ‘arguably the finest [game] Rockstar has ever produced’ (Nimer, 2010). Of course, Fernández-Vara quite properly notes that the revenue-influenced medium of games reviewing can lead to material ‘overtly biased towards the positive’ (2014, p.3) in contrast to the ‘sophisticated discourse’ of games as an established academic field, and a timely reminder of this may cast some small doubt over the integrity of the mainstream journalistic responses to *RDR*. Nevertheless, with a metacritic aggregate of 100% positive reviews, an average metacritic review score of 95/100, and recipient of 32 awards, *RDR* remains a major work in videogame history. It is, in Keith Stuart of *The Guardian*’s words, ‘every bit as compelling, brutish and beautiful as anything from [Sergio] Leone or [Sam] Peckinpah’ (Stuart, 2016). Indeed, Dawn Spring argues that *RDR* ‘demonstrates the range of ways that a historian can advance a thesis and argument in a scholarly game’. It is, she argues, a game which:

Takes on major themes of the era [...] ‘the transformation of a country into an urban nation, the Interstate Commerce Clause of 1887, the vast network of railroads, Manifest Destiny, the expansion of electricity to rural areas, and the development of the automobile and aircraft. Ongoing discussions throughout the game explore the expanding of the role of federal government.

(Spring, 2015, p.213)

Much of what Humphreys claims of *RDR* is similarly present in *RDR2*, albeit in the form of a new protagonist, Arthur Morgan. Unlike Marston, Morgan is a *bone fide* outlaw and member of the Van Der Linde Gang (the outfit that John Marston will later – chronologically – hunt down on behalf of the federal government). The critical accusations levelled at Marston, that he is ultimately recuperated into the neoliberal project by hunting down his former gang members in service of those who ‘created’ the outlaw in the first place (through corporate greed and economic disparity), do not apply to Morgan; one wonders, in fact, to what extent these scholarly critiques of *RDR* might have influenced the development of *RDR2*. Much more prominently than its predecessor, *RDR2* appeals to more progressive, twenty-first century liberal sensibilities³, and employs our encounters with place to generate its weight of feeling. Indeed, from the perspective site-specific performance, it much more readily ‘engages with site as symbol, site as story-teller, [and] site as structure’ (Wilkie, 2002, p.158), a clear example of which threads itself throughout (roughly) the first half of the game in three distinct, and iteratively impactful, moments.

Site as Storyteller, Site as Structure

In ‘Chapter 1: *Enter, Pursued by a Memory*’, we encounter Arthur and the rest of the Van Der Linde gang in the mountains, in the middle of a blizzard (Figure 1). Visibility is low (for them and us), and food and warmth is scarce. We discover the gang as a desperate and disparate group: men, women and children, old and young. They appear to us at the outset more as a nomadic group, enduring life-threatening conditions in the promise of a new start ‘somewhere else’, than a band of outlaws. The sentiment that the gang have no idea where they’re going, other than towards an as-yet unspecified south, and in pursuit of ‘hope’, draws explicitly on contemporary narratives of the refugee or migrant. The obscured view of what lies ahead, their literal and metaphorical paths to comfort and safety obscured by the deep and dangerous snow, provides an instant insight into how *RDR2* utilises site – in this instance – as story-teller-in-chief.



Figure 1: Arthur and the Van Der Linde gang try to survive in dangerous winter conditions (in Chapter 1: *Enter, Pursued by a Memory*) *Red Dead Redemption II*. Image: Rockstar Games

Descending from the mountains, Arthur and the gang enter ‘Chapter Two: *Horseshoe Overlook*’, to find the bustling town of Valentine, and the second moment in this chain of place-driven storytelling. (Figure 2). Replete with a saloon, jail, stables, a hotel and a train station, this quintessential ‘frontier town’ bears the all the hallmarks of twentieth and twenty-first century romanticized renderings of the Old West, drawing on firmly embedded cultural imagery from Sergio Leone’s 1966 *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*, 1968’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* and HBO’s *Westworld* (2016) (Figure 3). Here, the landscape stretches out into wide, sweeping vistas reminiscent of John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) and the landscape painters of the Hudson River School (1826-1870). The game’s character art, which carefully mimics the soft, low-contrast, *nostalgic* styles of John Singer Sargent (a contemporary to *RDR2*’s late-nineteenth century setting), highlights *RDR2* as a melting pot of cultural, cinematic and literary memory.



Figure 2: Coming down from the mountains, Arthur enters Valentine (in Chapter 2: *Horseshoe Overlook*) Red Dead Redemption II. Image: Rockstar Games

It is in Valentine and its surrounding areas that the player is provided with the first meaningful window into the depth of Arthur’s character, and it’s *vital* that this insight happens here because Valentine, with its hitching posts and saloon brawls is everything *we expect* the last remnants of the Old West to look and behave like. Similarly, Vella and Giappone (2018) state that ‘In order for a city in a gameworld to be experienced as a city, then, it must afford the spatial practices we understand as pertaining to a city’ even if, as is the case here, that city belongs to our literary and cinematic – rather than cartographic – memory. As we move with Arthur through the opening stories (both large and small) of *RDR2*, he reflects on feeling like a man ‘out of time’, lamenting the feeling of being left behind in a rapidly changing world: ‘this whole thing is pretty much done’, he opines, ‘we’re more ghosts than people’ (Rockstar San Diego, 2018). Perhaps the most stand-out of Arthur’s reflections of this kind, because of its curious parallels to the post-truth era of American (and latterly British) politics, is his assertion that ‘we’re thieves, in a world that don’t want us no more. We are dreamers in an even duller world of facts’ (ibid). Where in *RDR* the Western *as such* is employed as that ‘powerful conduit’ of neoliberal thought, in *RDR2* it is the *frontier* that is somehow that political ideal, a place for dreamers, rebels and reactionaries dissatisfied with the ‘dullness’ of fact.



Figure 3: Visions of the late 19th century American west from the films of Sergio Leone (here, *Once Upon a Time in the West*) bear a striking resemblance to the locales of *RDR2*.

The final part of this geographic narrative occurs in the opening sequence of ‘Chapter 4: *Saint Denis*’ (Figure 4) and makes perfect sense of Wilkie’s description of ‘site-as-

structure'. Fleeing trouble and the law further north, Arthur and the player must head to the Bastille Saloon in Saint Denis, a newly industrial steel and steam town, which rises forebodingly out of the marshland and plains surrounding it. In Saint Denis, unlike Valentine, we find streetlights lighting cobbled and orderly urban streets; theatres, photography studios, butchers, barbers and doctors. Chimneys, factories, and public transport systems reveal an emerging, civilized, and emboldened industrial America. As players, we feel as far from the snowy wilderness of Chapter 1 and the rough-and-ready Valentine as Arthur feels from this new, modernizing world. That we feel such a wrenching dissonance between these three orders of existence is a result of our *iterative* relationship to the landscape. The regions in the game are compressed and elaborated, becoming caricatures, or reducing topographic into topological as Wark (2007) suggests, rather than accurate representations of historical places (Schwartz, 2006). It takes Arthur, for example, less than 10 minutes to ride from the mountain ranges of the Grizzlies to the coastal swamps of Lemoyne. But it is precisely in this *compression* (a compression of quasi-*real* space that only *unreal* geographies can provide), and the order in which we encounter those things compressed, that *RDR2* utilizes place to its affective advantage⁴. Moreover, while a journey on horseback across the map might only take 10 minutes *direct*, it *actually* takes well in excess of an hour to even make it out of the blizzard-strewn mountains of *RDR2*'s opening chapter. Indeed, on first playthrough, the very *thought* of a place as safe and hospitable as Valentine (let alone the bright metropolis of Saint Denis) is inconceivable, such is the vastness of our surroundings and their all-encompassing natural conditions. Similarly, once the gang are safely in Valentine, that amalgam of cultural reference points, the idea that the sprawling, industrializing city of Saint Denis is just to our south, in a world where game is hunted with bow and arrow and railroad seems almost magical, is inconceivable. In the case of Saint Denis, the improbability of its emergence begins with the lack of well-formed images of this liminal moment in history where the Old West meets the New America in our cultural cache. Thus, the journey across *RDR2*'s terrain is an epochal one, a cultural one, a technological and industrial one; each of those sites, its own palimpsest of American history. Those questions of Pearson's ('who am I and what am I doing?', 'Am I a stranger or an inhabitant?') are all thrown to the fore because Saint Denis as a place *in a broader chain of places* casts our certainties of all those things into doubt for as players *with* Arthur, and players *of* him. It might be said, then, that the places and regions of *RDR2* all appear to perform what Edward S. Casey (Casey, 2002) calls a *topopoesis*, an attempt towards a poetic truth of place rather than *topographical* representation. The plains, the swamplands, mountains, Western towns and cities come together as *poetic* places, places that reveal something affective, and human. Indeed, *RDR2* is arguably the most explicit and abundant example of *topopoesis* in videogames, an argument which would in some ways explain the denseness of our findings here.



Figure 4: Arthur's 'man out of time' sentiment reaches its crescendo as the player encounters the thoroughly modern Saint Denis (in Chapter 4: *Saint Denis*) Red Dead Redemption II. Image: Rockstar Games

Home, Identity, and Self-Motivation

The empathy-driven climax of feeling when the player first arrives in Saint Denis is a synergy of *gameplay* and *gameplace* that reveals both to the player and to Arthur what bubbles under the surface of all the story-driven tensions of *RDR2*, the idea of *home*. This is home, too, in its most expanded sense. The anachronistic frontiersman or outlaw that Arthur embodies is concerned as much with a political home as a bricks-and-mortar one. Indeed, the *how* of the Van Der Linde gang's home appears as important than the *where* insofar as *RDR2* positions both Arthur and rest of the Van Der Linde Gang as classical, 'cowboy myth' figureheads for political individualism: enigmatic hero-renegeads who 'must live in the industrial city amid inequality, bureaucracy, and corruption'. But the individualist hero 'needs an open frontier' (Wright, 2001, p.22), and Arthur and the gang's search for a place to call home, fuelled by the 'implicit image of an endless agrarian frontier – real equal opportunity' (ibid) is precisely that: an image, a 'theoretical fantasy' which 'justified individualist ideas and market relations' and with it 'generated a legitimating individualist myth, a myth of market origin, the myth of the Wild West' (ibid). Home in *RDR2* is found where the keepers of that 'implicit image' – the gang – are found, and as such Arthur and the gang's base of operations – the camp – moves across the map as the story progresses. The camp is the place of care, maintenance, and familial social interaction. Thus the camp, even though not staying in the same location throughout the game, acts as a home for the player. Through this kind of movement and motion through place, Arthur becomes what Pearson – when outlining 'stances, attitudes and presuppositions' towards site-specific visitation - would call a *nomad*, 'using points and locations to define paths rather than places to be. The enemy of the nomad is the authority that wants to take the space and enclose it and to create fixed and well directed paths for movement' (Pearson, 2010, p.20)

The autonomy from 'social duties' (as well as political or economic ones) emblematic of the individualism of the agrarian frontier, in combination with the *unfixedness* of home, serves as the mechanic for much of the gameplay outside of the main 'story'. Apart from in short cut-scenes, the player has almost continuous control over Arthur's actions, developing in-turn a strong kinaesthetic connection with the avatar over the course of the gameplay. As is the nature of Rockstar's sandbox games, the player has

the freedom to roam most (if not all) of the game environment at any time and can undertake self-motivated journeys and explorations at will (cf. Calleja, 2011, p.82). There is a slight friction, however, between this ‘free-roaming’ mode and the tasks and quests required to advance in the story. In free-roaming mode Arthur becomes a vessel of the player’s own objectives and desires, which also means that the player is *responsible* for Arthur’s actions. Story progression quests and story beats, on the other hand, take *away* the player’s agency while at the same time revealing Arthur’s personality and imposing *his* fictional agency on the player. In this way, the game forces the player to attain goals and perform activities which might run counter the player’s own morals and desires, or ‘free-roaming’ identity. This friction creates a dual mode of agency for the player, allowing them to switch between taking the responsibility of their own actions and experiencing and enacting Arthur’s way of being in the world⁵. Similarly, the assumed player’s identity in the gameworld fluctuates between identifying *with* Arthur, or *as* Arthur, weaving for each unique player a unique game identity defined by the tapestry of action each player chooses to take. Indeed, and in relation to *gameplace*, Nitsche (2009, p.193) argues that “the specific identity that “I” has attained in this space is an indicator for its placeness”.

Encounters with minor quest starters and smaller story beats are revealed either through the classic ‘dot on the mini-map’, or by random encounter – alerted by the call of a non-player character (NPC), or drawn by the sight of a gathering of people. These two ways of encountering *RDR2*’s content can again be understood in relation to Pearson’s ‘stances and attitudes’ (2010, p.20). In the former (the ‘mini-map’), we play ‘as *wayfarer*: moving from one familiar place to another [...] continually on the move’ (Pearson, 2010, p.20), in the latter – those chance encounters – we play ‘as *derivist*: [in which we drop our] usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there’ (ibid).

The goals and goal-directed activities of the player and the NPCs create meaning for the places in which they occur. This is most evident in the inhabited regions of the game. The camp sites, towns, and the city teem with NPCs which seem to have their own aims, desires, and objectives. The constant background chatter of the NPCs not only gives an impression of constant human activity, but also gives clues to networked, goal-directed activities happening around us. For example, just listening to NPCs interacting with each other in a Saint Denis marketplace provides a sense of meaningful activity carried out in the place regardless of the player’s actions highlighting the settlements as places for encounters (Vella and Giappone, 2018; Norberg-Schulz, 1985). The NPCs have different levels of believability (Mateas, 1997; Tanenbaum, 2008) depending on the amount of interaction the player can have with them. Even the background characters, the everyday citizens of Saint Denis’ marketplaces or its tavern patrons, give an impression of having an identity, a history, and their own sense of purpose. It is a world that appears to exist *in spite of us*, rather than *for us*. Here the player exists as Pearson’s *flâneur*, who, as he describes, ‘has the freedom to loiter, to witness and interpret passing scenes and incidents, diverse activities, unpredictable juxtapositions, fleeting occurrences, multifarious sights and sounds’ (Pearson, 2020, p.20). Similar devices appear in random NPC encounters. The dialogue often, if not always, concentrates on the current objectives (including needs) or personal history of the NPC. *RDR2*’s pervading sense of realism thus resides more in the pedestrian, domestic details of everyday life in the place than in the realistic graphics and physics of the game. As Galloway (2004) states, game studies should ‘turn not to a theory of realism in gaming as mere realistic representation, but define realist games as those games that reflect critically on the minutia of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama and injustice’.

In addition to the main storyline quests, random scripted encounters, and myriad of side quests the gameworld affords the player a plethora of other activities, from simply admiring and exploring the game's varied versions of quintessential American landscapes, to poker in the saloon, to taking in a show at the theatre, to big game hunting. The player has the freedom to pursue any or none of these activities, with many of them structured in such a way that they allow the player to form their own long-term goals, such as trying to hunt as many different animals as possible. The achievement and compendium systems (often symbolically referenced in Arthur's personal journal – in which he proves himself a talented artist) even encourage these kinds of long term personal goal settings. In this way, the gameworld is not just a space for traversal, but a world for *being in* (Heidegger, 2000; Vella, 2013; Jones, 2015). Indeed, that distinction, succinctly put, may be the key distinction between *gameworld*, and *gameplace*.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we investigated placeness and sitedness in *Red Dead Redemption 2* through an analytical conversation between performance studies and digital games research, and asked through that analysis how the critical languages of site-specific performance might broaden our understanding of the significance of place in contemporary videogames. The close-reading of the game developed a dense assemblage of complementary concepts and insights of the compositional aspects of *gameplace* in the generation of affect, emotional response, and player identification in the gameworld. In RDR2, we conclude that the design primacy of place *qua* place, as both topo-poetic storyteller (Casey, 2002; Wilkie, 2002) and structural ballast, is the compositional fulcrum through which it might succeed in affecting aesthetic or emotive responses from its players who, in turn, play a variety of roles tasked with 'forms and modes of engagement' as defined by Pearson's 'acts of visitation' (2010, p.19). Finally, we assume that similarly rich, but complementary, analytical findings would emerge from other games and game genres as well. For example, we plan to compare these findings together with similar analyses of *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014), *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015), and in so doing hope to enrich and further define the concept of *gameplace* and its usefulness in a contemporary vocabulary of games analysis.

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ENDNOTES

¹ By way of simple example, one might argue that Nintendo/Bullet Proof Software's *Tetris* (1989) occurs in *space* rather than *place*, abstracted as it is from any meaningful human reference-points that would speak to a world or environment critical to the gameplay or an *affective* game experience. While a case might be made for the aesthetic framing performed by *Tetris*' music, the now iconic 'Type-A' (an arrangement of the Russian folk song *Korobeiniki*), it has no tangible bearing on the reception of the work *as it might be determined through play* (or, *what we do*).

² According to Ali (2016, p.327) gameplace 'refers to a particular and specific location within a gamespace that evokes meaning, whether that is to an individual or a group on a personal, cultural or otherwise level.' Our notion of gameplace is similar, but also takes into account how ludic elements such as player activities, goals, and narrative structures create that sense of meaning.

³ In what is the most striking of many examples, *RDR2* is partially built on an 'honor' system, whereby the 'positive' or 'negative' actions of the player impacts upon the behavior of local NPCs and other world-state conditions such as the price of supplies from vendors, and dialogue trees. Any crimes Arthur commits (or, is *seen* committing) lowers his honor, with robbery and murder being the most 'dishonorable' actions. However, there are a handful of points in the game where Arthur may, entirely by chance, happen upon a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) meeting in the woods, replete with white pointed hats and burning crosses. Should Arthur mete out some kind of punishment to the Klan, from a 'simple' beating to burning them to death with their own crosses, Arthur receives *positive* honor, and it is the only instance in the game where committing a crime (even a capital offense) is regarded through the lens of an ethical politics one-hundred years in the future.

⁴ Nitsche (2009, p. 198) suggests that '[l]ocation can become a valued place when it manages to trigger a projection of cultural references into it'. The regions and locations in the game do not *accurately* represent historical real locations, but rather (and precisely like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*) uses well-known cultural tropes to invoke a sense of that *real* place. For example, swamps of Lemoyne resemble Louisiana swamplands in a similar way that Saint Denis reflects popular cultural images of New Orleans and the American Deep South. These dense matrices of mediated geographical and cultural references in the game give meaning, depth, and value to the places visited by the player.

⁵ What is particularly curious about this in relation to *RDR2* is that it serves as a prequel to a game in which the Van Der Linde gang are hunted down and killed. That's important because Arthur Morgan, who is a very senior member of the gang, does not appear in *RDR*. It becomes clear quite quickly then that Arthur may not be alive by the time the events of *RDR* take place and as such *RDR2* is haunted by the prospect (or expectation) of Arthur's death. As a player, that haunting both galvanises ones energy to explore and impose our self-motivated desires on to the game's emergent narratives, while at the game diminishing it because we feel that no matter what we do (and this becomes clearer in Chapter 5 when Arthur is diagnosed with tuberculosis) we are locked in to an outcome that we can't control *even imaginatively*, because the very existence chronologically later *RDR* closes that possibility for us.