

POP CULTURE



We binge-watch one Netflix series after another, we devour movies and games. Often it is no more than mindless entertainment, while at other times it even raises scientific questions. Pop culture, viewed through the eyes of a scientist.

This time, Ruud Jacobs, Assistant Professor in Communication and Technology who teaches and researches how games communicate, shares his views on the game Red Dead Redemption 2. Beware, if you haven't played the game: spoiler alert!

The plot

In Red Dead Redemption 2, you play as Arthur Morgan, who is a loyal member of the notorious Van der Linde gang. The story starts in 1899, in a fictional recreation of the American Old West. After a botched heist, the gang is on the run. Realizing that the progress of civilization is ending the time of outlaws, the gang decides to scrape enough money together to escape the law and retire.

First impression

'It's an open world game, like many others. But the beginning is always like an alleyway: you don't feel an immediate sense of danger – although the circumstances story-wise beg to differ. The game just wants to teach you the set of controls. But when you're heading towards the small town of Valentine, the snow melts away and you see the open world in all its splendor and glory. You immediately get a sense of the convincing depth of this game.'

Realism/feasibility

'I found that the developer, Rockstar Games, has its own ideas of what a cowboy should behave like. That doesn't really comply with my way of playing games: I always try to be the most kind and helpful person imaginable. The game really doesn't help me with that. You usually get one positive option to interact with non-playable characters – Arthur saying 'howdy' – opposed to a ton of unpleasant or violent options. On top of that, the sometimes clunky controls didn't help me to move around peacefully:

while trying to hitch my horse to a post, I bumped into someone on the boardwalk. I tried my best to de-escalate the situation, but I ended up being shot in the street.'

'The game also has an honour system, allowing you to be good or bad. But I experienced that the freedom of choice is a false sense of freedom. It's much easier to be a bad guy. Especially in the story missions, you're often forced to threaten, rob and kill. I don't believe Rockstar wanted this game to carry out a message, but there is always a message in how a game plays. In my own research, I made some adjustments to a cotton picking game that visualised the scandal of kids forced to pick cotton in Uzbekistan. It turned out that making it easier to pick cotton cut the persuasion power in half. Translate that to moral choices you make in Red Dead Redemption: Arthur is by no means invincible, but he's good at shooting. So the game is telling you that in moments there's no way out, you can always turn to violence to resolve the issue.'

'But I did like the depth of the game, its characters and the way it allows you to be a cowboy. That's why everyone who played the game has their own unique experiences. For instance, I loved hunting and crafting, so I thoroughly enjoyed making a hat out of a skunk. Someone else probably enjoys being a gunslinging bank robber. I found that approaching the game like you're literally cosplaying is the most fun and satisfying. I don't like the violent robbing missions in the story, but this way I could stick to my own nice guy way of playing and still identify with the story for about 80 percent.'

Stray observations

- 'I own two horses: Nylon and Cotton. I love the fact that you're able to bond with your horse and for me it works. I truly feel sorry for them if I let them crash into something on accident. I always try to remember to brush and feed them. If I don't, my girlfriend makes sure to remind me.'
- 'It's a 'Made in America' game through and through. And the current political climate also shows. For an outlaw, Arthur has some morals and values that some people could learn from nowadays: he respects women's rights and is against slavery.'
- 'Another sign of the developer's take on modern society: If you kill Ku Klux Klan members, you gain honour. If you walk into an Indian reservation, the game forces you to put your guns away. I think Rockstar wanted to avoid as much controversy as possible.'

Text: Rense Kuipers
Photo: Rikkert Harink



Cover of Red Dead Redemption 2

- 'If I would compare this game to other forms of pop culture, I'd say it's like a Netflix series of multiple seasons: you can either choose to binge it or choose to even enjoy the slower 'filler' episodes. Although I do think video games can play more into the emotions of people.'
- 'The detail I loved most – besides the great dialogue with random characters you encounter – is your hat. It's humiliating to see it getting knocked off your head when you're in a brawl and even more humiliating to pick it out of the mud later. To me, those are the true Wild West moments.'