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Press X to Wait: The Cultural Politics of Slow Game Time in *Red Dead Redemption 2*

by John Vanderhoef, Matthew Thomas Payne

Abstract

This article introduces "slow game time" as a way of explaining some players' negative responses to the prevailing animation, gameplay and storytelling tempo of Rockstar Studios' 2018 blockbuster western saga, *Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2)*. Unlike most multi-platform computer and video games that enjoy critical and commercial success, *RDR2* frequently employs slow game time, which breaks from mainstream design approaches that employ what we call hegemonic game time, or a privileging of player action, efficiency and optimization. Regardless of whether this temporal mode is embraced or criticized by players, *RDR2*'s use of slow game time reveals the unmarked hegemonic game time that governs mainstream action-adventure design conventions and transforms what might be subversive gameplay in another context, emphasizing process, stillness and unproductive play, into a dominant mode of engagement in a major blockbuster game.

Keywords: video game, game time, western, temporality, capitalism, productivity

Once Upon Some Times in the West

Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Studios, 2018) is a video game that is fundamentally about time -- and slow time in particular. Its single-player campaign introduces us to the Van der Linde gang, a motley group of outlaws who are running from the law in a fictionalized version of 1899 America. The player assumes the role of Arthur Morgan, the competent right-hand man of the gang's charismatic leader, Dutch Van der Linde. Plagued by misfortune, poor planning and backstabbing, the gang relocates from one temporary camp to another in the pursuit of one final score that will secure their financial safety. But the Van der Linde gang is a group that is running out of time. Most immediately, they are running out of time to escape the dragnet closing around them. They are also an aging group of outlaws who find that as the western frontier closes, so too goes their vagabond lifestyle. Placed in the boots of Arthur Morgan, players witness their own gradual demise to a terminal case of tuberculosis. As these proverbial narrative, epochal and existential clocks tick down, the game takes great lengths to stretch out, at times painfully, its waning moments in an effort to have players experience a mythologized West that was celebrated by critics for its authentic and contemplative design.

Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2) earned nearly universal praise from critics and fans for its technical achievements made on behalf of its perceived commitment to realism. For example, the game features

dynamic weather and wildlife systems ensuring that one's extended horseback journeys would remain varied and novel even after dozens of hours of play. Along with numerous industry awards and accolades, *RDR2* also earned the cheeky "cowboy simulator" (or "sim") label for its fastidious attention to detail. Game elements that lent to this characterization include complex recipe and clothing crafting systems, item searches requiring players to open and close furniture drawers one by one, and -- easily the most common observation shared online -- horse testicles that would swing freely or retract depending on a region's climate. One of the biggest complaints in the discourse surrounding *RDR2-as-cowboy-sim* is that its commitment to verisimilitude frequently slows gameplay to a crawl, detracting from its more conventionally fulfilling actions like combat or exploration. For example, in a post on the website *Gamefaqs* titled, "WHY is everything so goddamn slowwww???" a player expresses frustration with "the painful gameplay" of *RDR2* and the fact that "it takes Arthur forever to do every single little thing" (u/trenken, 2018). This sentiment encapsulates much of the popular response to the tempo of its single-player campaign mode.

Accusations of slowness are shaped by gendered and normative understandings of video games and temporality as privileging a particular form of play for a particular player demographic. Such restrictive definitions, suggest Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul (2019), have direct impacts on the kinds of video games that get produced and who is invited to play them. Game designer-scholars Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce (2008) deploy the concept of "hegemony of play" to discuss the dominant modes of design, narrative and interaction that have defined commercial game production. Such games "value particular skills: mastery of quick reflexes and an ability to solve complex spatial rotation problems in real time" (sec. 2, para. 6). However, one aspect that these scholars do not highlight in their hegemony of play discussion is the temporal relations and rhythms created by such design conventions. Engaging with Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) work on queer temporality, Bo Ruberg (2019b) has called this dominant temporal mode in video games chrononormativity. Building on the generative ideas of chrononormativity and hegemonic play, we propose "hegemonic game time" to describe those prevailing relations and rhythms of play that emphasize the connection between pleasure and power and between speed and control.

Slow game time differs considerably from hegemonic game time, which structures most experiences developed within the dominant video game industry. Hegemonic play and hegemonic game time resonate with John Fiske's (1989) notion of hegemonic pleasures, or those practices that align themselves with power and forms of social discipline. Hegemonic game time insists on the immediacy of the gameworld and the player's supreme role in mastering the computational system to determine one's own fate. It is a digital fantasy largely predicated on speed and meritocracy, of masculinist dominance and mastery over technology and of besting one's competitors -- be they human or powered by artificial intelligence. Grieg de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford (2009) discuss such experiences as "games of empire," which they describe as representing a planetary, militarized hypercapitalism. Games of empire utilize normative, hegemonic game time and encourage players to efficiently conquer gameworlds and others in the name of mastery. The deployment of time limits and/or rewards for achieving goals in a timely fashion are just a few ways this dominant mode of temporality reveals itself. Inevitable speed runs of popular games are another. Player aversion to slowness in games is not simply about waiting or about deliberative, circumspect mechanics. When games introduce guardrails that place hard limits on game mastery -- be it through space, animation, mechanics, or sprawling narratives -- it often forecloses demonstrations of hegemonic gaming performance.

In this article, we conduct a discourse analysis of popular and critical reception of *RDR2* alongside a textual analysis of its animation systems, mechanics and narrative to demonstrate how *RDR2*'s single-player campaign embraces slow game time in ways that challenge the game's otherwise conventional investment in hegemonic play tropes and its status as a \$200 million, triple-A game. Through its deployment of slow game time, *RDR2* produces ludic moments that frustrate player expectations of speed and efficiency in the service of contemplation, stillness, unproductive wait time and emotional resonance. If hegemonic game time is about efficiency, optimization and productivity, then slow game time eschews these conventions to explore notions of process, stillness, waste and the pregnant potential of a null set. *RDR2* is not slow only through player choice, however. Rather, by ways of aesthetic, narrative and mechanical means, *RDR2*'s slow game time betrays the dominant chrononormativity that governs big-budget video game design practices and neoliberal capitalism more broadly. Despite its triple-A production context, its enormous budget and its documented exploitative relations of labor that animated its years-long development cycle (Schreier, 2018), *RDR2* paradoxically provides a game with a complex relationship between time and productivity; one that seeks to slow rather than accelerate the rhythms of play, and by extension, the rhythms of everyday life.

The Critical Potentiality of Slow Game Time

Released in November of 2018, *Red Dead Redemption 2* enjoyed the largest opening weekend of any entertainment product ever, at the time, earning over \$725 million in three days and selling over 17 million copies in just two weeks (Crecente, 2018). Despite being a commercial hit, the discourse around the game soon shifted to the slow rhythms that made playing the game frustrating for some. Critics pointed to the game's lethargic animations when performing actions, its countless horseback journeys across an enormous map and its sprawling, meandering narrative (Thier, 2018). Others opined that *RDR2*'s play rhythms make it "the weirdest, slowest, most confounding big-budget game of this decade" (Plante, 2018) and prevent it from being a game "you can pick up and have a blast within minutes" (Reynolds, 2018). One critic bluntly wrote, "It is defiantly slow-paced, exuberantly unfun, and wholly unconcerned with catering to the needs or wants of its players" (Hamilton, 2018). While these critical assertions about pacing were largely complimentary to the overall experience of *RDR2*, many players were less forgiving.

While perhaps a vocal minority considering the game's commercial success, a notable current of player feedback online bemoans *RDR2*'s glacial tempo. For example, in addition to the Gamefaqs comment highlighted in this article's introduction, negative user reviews on the aggregate review website Metacritic lambast the game's sedate rhythms. One player jokes the "game should be called Red Dead Slow Motion" (lilbagginz, 2018) and another player laments that it's "a boring and tedious simulation game...with horribly unresponsive controls and terribly slow pacing" (The1MrNate, 2018). These critical pieces, forum posts and user reviews all share a direct criticism of *RDR2*'s embrace of slow game time, all of which suggests that the game's tempos are in opposition to an assumed, normative play speed.

Despite their notoriety as twitch-based, action experiences, computer and video games have long-embraced a variety of temporal registers. In his book on video game time, Christopher Hanson (2018) reminds us that "[t]he temporalities of video games are numerous: players preserve, pause, slow, rewind, replay, reactivate, and reanimate time as part of the play mechanics of an increasing number of games" (p. 3). Media and game scholars have attended to these dynamic gameplay temporalities using different methodologies from various

research traditions, often deploying a single game, series, or genre as its case study. An incomplete but representative sample of this work includes understanding layers of time in the *Mass Effect* series narratologically (Zakowski, 2013); assessing the temporal mechanics of the indie platformer *Braid* (Number None, 2008) via a cognitive semantics framework (Stamenković and Jačević, 2014); conceptualizing a chronotypography of game time from a literary studies perspective (Jayemanne, 2020); and documenting the limitations of queer movement in the walking sim *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) when played by those attempting to complete it in record time (Ruberg, 2019a).

In particular Jayemanne's work above offers scholars a way to apply a study of time across myriad genres and time registers, creating a hermeneutic that centers on three types of events: diachronic, synchronic and the unstable signifier. Diachronic events are those that split temporal experiences, whereas synchronic events are associated with ritual and structure, and can draw timeframes together. Jayemanne (2020) offers the examples of a gamer losing track of time while immersed in play (diachrony), and recreating the seasonal Christmas nativity scene that synchronizes past rituals with the present moment (synchrony) (p. 815). The third category, unstable signifiers, have the capacity to switch between diachrony and synchrony. According to Jayemanne, it is the diachronic deployment of time, the excitement and dynamism of kinetic action and speed, that lends itself to immersion and timelessness in video games. Synchronic events, on the other hand, create ruptures in the flow of game time. These disconnects disrupt the magic circle of play, reminding players of the artificial structures. Despite the fact that most blockbuster games, as Jayemanne notes, are temporally stable, *RDR2* is a remarkable experiment in deploying unstable signifiers that fluctuate between the action-based diachronic game time and the more real-time, and thus disruptive, synchronic time that we have been calling slow game time. This article contributes to this growing body of research of game time in general and about temporality in *RDR2* in particular (e.g. Zimmerman, 2022; Wills, in-press) by examining how players' negative reactions to *RDR2*'s slow game time reveal unspoken expectations of hegemonic game design conventions and how these expectations are the result of broader cultural and neoliberal forces concerning the normative ideas of productive play.

The dominance of hegemonic game time and the resulting expectations it cultivates in players is manifest in conventional game design, and it pervades everyday gaming discourse. From leaderboards celebrating completion times and high scores to live-streamed speedrunning competitions on YouTube Gaming and Twitch.tv, gaming communities frequently celebrate players' abilities to best one another and their own previous records. Within this hegemonic temporal regime, Christopher A. Paul (2018) notes how games that lack standard meritocratic systems are often discursively and rhetorically positioned as non-games (p. 7). Players' affective aversion to slowness is partially a consequence of not wanting to relinquish a sense of control. But it likewise reflects a desire to believe that one's place on the gaming hierarchy is somehow neutral and earned; a meritocratic belief reflected by capitalism and reinforced by hegemonic game time.

Hegemonic game time reflects a larger colonizing of all time, including play time, by the neoliberal regime of contemporary global capitalism. Whether a bunch of "bullshit" or not (Bogost, 2015), the design principles of gamification (Deterding et al., 2011), applied across professional and private time and activities, are an ideal mechanism to ultimately create more value for capitalist enterprises (Rey, 2015). While admittedly an edict of industrial capitalism and the Protestant work ethic before it, under post-industrial capitalism, shaped as it has been by neoliberal philosophy since the 1970s (Harvey, 2007), time is

something individuals are responsible for managing and maximizing inside and outside of the formal workplace. Under this ideological and temporal regime, wasting time engenders guilt, shame, or a sense of squandered potential. Neoliberalism believes the marketplace, powered by the liberty of the rational subject acting in self-interest, will lead to individual and collective liberty and progress. The gamification of the workplace -- or the blurring of work and individual pursuits, and of productivity and pleasure -- translates into a lived ideology whereby even pleasurable pastimes are thought to need an efficient and productive end (deWinter et al., 2014). While the business world has used rudimentary game design to motivate and control employees, the same impulses to transform productivity into play and play into productivity have made their ways into video game culture and design.

This ceaseless drive to imbricate play and productivity is evident in a host of player practices and in the design conventions of popular game genres. Players experience a sense of pleasurable productivity by completing the next challenge, leveling up, racking up impressive kill-death ratios, or by otherwise mastering games. Beyond simple bragging rights, these accomplishments are often expressed as gamer scores, achievements and trophies -- in-game accolades unlocked for accomplishing specific tasks. Representing a kind of "gaming capital," these awards are shared publicly, further evidencing the mastery and productivity of a player's game time (Consalvo, 2007). The mobile "clicker," background and incremental game genres (Alharthi, et al., 2017) reify the connection between play and productivity by commodifying time itself (Keogh and Richardson, 2018; Moralde, 2019), allowing players who invest real-world funds to accelerate productivity while confining the rest to slow game time.

Game scholars have identified alternative ludic temporalities as possible sites of resistance to the demands of late capitalism and neoliberal regimes of time and efficiency (Stone, 2018, Knutson, 2018). Of particular note, Rainforest Scully-Blaker (2019) identifies "radical slowness" in video games as a subversive form of play that can act as sites of resistance. Scully-Blaker argues that radical slowness "is a deliberate failure to 'keep up' with the ever-accelerating rhythm of capitalist society as a political act" (p. 103). That is, radical slowness represents a *deliberate* play style available to the player that eschews a game's capitalist rhythms in favor of alternative forms of temporal relations. Scully-Blaker demonstrates radical slowness at work by examining how players can choose to play a game like *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* (Nintendo EDP, 2017) without engaging in the routinized task-based work that turns play into a kind of capitalist labor. Similarly, Bo Ruberg's work (2019b), mentioned above, juxtaposes Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) concept of "chrononormativity," or dominant narratives of progress and the demand to use one's time toward productive ends, with "queer temporality," which they argue "represents a resistance to the standard logics that dictate what one should do, where, when, and at what speed" (p. 185). While Ruberg's engagement with queer temporality extends to both extremes of temporal experience, such as the breakneck tempo of speedrunning and the more methodical rhythms of radical slowness in games, they nonetheless share Scully-Blaker's investment in temporality as a potential site of subversive play.

Game time can therefore be shifted toward either hegemonic or resistant ends of a temporal spectrum. For instance, Scully-Blaker (2018) identifies stasis and stillness as two ways that game designers craft slower player experiences. For Scully-Blaker, stasis is a form of inaction created by specific game mechanics, like slow movement, while stillness derives from emphasizing sublime aesthetics, such as beautiful vistas for players to pause and view. In addition to designed slowness, Scully-Blaker (2019) also suggests that players can choose

to engage in "radical slowness," a purposeful slowing down of task-based actions within systems designed for productive play time, serving as a potential critique of larger capitalist temporal formations and labor relations in video games.

Building off of this work, we examine *RDR2* as a game whose design facilitates, and, in fact, demands players slow down and wait. What does it mean for a massive commercial game to embrace slow game time, and how do we square any potential critique that its temporal systems might produce with its development and distribution within global industrial structures of capitalist game design? How does *RDR2*'s insistence on delaying the inevitable end of the Old West, the Van der Linde gang's exploits and Arthur's own life unexpectedly create ideological ruptures and opportunities to critique neoliberal temporality and its demands for efficient and productivity at all times?

Slow Your Horse There, Cowboy

Explanations that dismiss player frustration in *RDR2* as the end-result of an overzealous dedication to realistic design principles neglect its temporal rhythms as an underlying cause of affective distress. It isn't that *RDR2* is alarmingly slow because of the game's uncompromising devotion to verisimilitude -- though it is, at times, *painfully* uncompromising-- but by not streamlining this so-called cowboy sim for hegemonic game time, the game produces a sense of temporal rudderlessness. Players' frustrations are not the product of excess design elements undertaken to fabricate some authentic western experience; rather, the excessive pauses, breaks and disruptions in *RDR2*'s magic circle of play are what allow reality to bleed through uninvited. It is capitalism's chrononormativity and its intrusion into a faithfully-rendered gamespace that engenders unease in players -- wherein one cannot escape or outrun, even on virtual horseback riding in the late-nineteenth century, the creeping demands to never waste one's time. Such deployments of slow game time trigger player anxiety connected to capitalism by foreclosing play opportunities that would otherwise ameliorate such concerns -- standard practices like streamlining Morgan's player-character abilities or including clear and accessible "fast travel" features that expedite large-world transportation.

RDR2 evokes slow game time and its attendant potential for critique through a combination of what Scully-Blaker calls stasis and stillness in game design, or intentional or unintentional game mechanics and aesthetics, respectively, that encourage player inaction. In addition to stasis and stillness, we introduce the concept of "prolongment," or the cultivation of slow game time through the implementation of an excessively extended narrative. Specifically, *RDR2* produces its languid cowboy tempo across its player actions and activities (stasis), through its slow traversal system (stillness) and by embracing a narrative invested in stretching out the last moments of a dying era (prolongment). Surprisingly for a triple-A game from a studio like Rockstar, *RDR2*'s design encourages players to engage in radical slowness not necessarily as a subversive activity contra to the game's intentions, but as the dominant mode of play that hinges on these disruptions. Regardless of whether this temporal mode is embraced or criticized by players, *RDR2*'s use of slow game time provides a larger critique of and resistance to hegemonic game time and transforms otherwise subversive gameplay into a dominant mode of engagement in a major blockbuster game.

Action and Stasis

Mechanically, *RDR2* frustrates expectations for fluidity and efficient control of the game's protagonist Arthur Morgan. The actions players pursue in *RDR2* center on the accumulation of resources needed to overcome increasingly difficult challenges. However, the game deploys stasis in its design mechanics, slowing even banal activities by

extending the time needed to execute typical actions. Nearly every in-game action is linked to canned animations that leave the player waiting for the game to catch up to their intentions. Optional activities like finding hidden treasure, fishing, or hunting likewise thwart attempts at efficient and rapid resource-gathering. Frustrated players have framed the ruptures they experience during play as the result of poor controls or a misplaced emphasis on simulation. Such responses not only illustrate the game's investment in extending its own diegetic and representational temporality through its animations and activities, but also reveal the extent to which hegemonic game time has shaped conventional video game design and player expectations for decades.



Figure 1: Arthur Morgan takes his time searching a cabinet for supplies (Rockstar Studios, 2018).

Early in the game, at a lone cabin in the mountains, after Morgan and his companions murder members of a rival gang occupying the residence, Dutch Van der Linde instructs the player to search the house for supplies. Unlike in most third-person action-adventure games that streamline item pickups, in *RDR2* players watch Morgan reach into every cupboard and drawer, pulling items out one by one and placing them in his satchel (Figure 1). This extends resource gathering from an action that might take a moment into a process that unfolds over several, unavoidable beats. Repetitive actions like mounting a horse, looting a body, or skinning felled animals for their hides slow the game's forward momentum. While these brief moments are hardly noteworthy in isolation, the sheer volume of these animations over the course of the massive campaign adds up to considerable wait time and invites players to reflect on their inactivity.

Slow game time extends beyond animations to the game's many side activities players can choose to perform. In addition to central story missions that advance the plot, *RDR2* gives players the option to engage in activities like fishing, searching for treasure, hunting legendary wildlife and cooking at campfires. Although side-quests are pro forma in action-adventure game design, each of these activities in *RDR2* produce their own wait times since they involve patience and, in some cases, careful, meticulous movements to perform successfully. For instance, unlike hunting standard wildlife like rabbits and deer, which players can do from horseback on their way to distant destinations, legendary creatures require players to carefully track footprints or droppings and strategically use bait or scents to locate these animal targets.

Players are first introduced to hunting legendary animals in Chapter 2 of the game. After Morgan's companion Hosea leads him to a riverbank where he last saw a massive grizzly bear, players begin to hunt the bear; first, by locating paw prints on the riverbank and then by activating the "Eagle Eye" game system that slows time, mutes the colors on the screen and illuminates a vapor trail indicating the animal's path. Players follow this illuminated trail, leading them to discover the bloody remains of a fish, and after another period of tracking to fresh bear droppings. Players eventually find that the trail has gone cold and are asked to lure the bear with bait as they hide

behind a boulder. After waiting a minute, the game prompts players to check the bait, which triggers a predetermined ambush from the monstrous bear before it lumbers away. While designed as a tutorial, this story-based introduction to legendary animal hunting illustrates the game's systematic deployment of slow game time during optional activities that repeatedly thwart the goals of hurried, determined players. Furthermore, the game's legendary hunts take far longer than this introductory example and require even more patience and waiting (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The player methodically tracks and kills the legendary silver fox (Rockstar Studios, 2018).

Similar to the Eagle Eye mechanic, another central combat mechanic that deliberately slows time is the "Dead Eye" gunslinger ability. This mechanic dramatically slows game time to give players the chance to line up a series of gunshots to eliminate enemies, or to strike the same enemy multiple times. Often referred to as "bullet time," a term borrowed from *The Matrix* film franchise, the mechanic of slowing down game time to give players a strategic advantage over foes is hardly novel. Games across genres, including *Viewtiful Joe* (Capcom Production Studio, 2003) and *F.E.A.R* (Monolith Productions, 2005), are only a few titles that employ this combat mechanic. The *Red Dead* series, in which *RDR2* is the third title, fits into this chronology of bullet time and has made use of the Dead Eye mechanic since the first entry. Dead Eye seems to be an example of hegemonic play par excellence, given that it gives players control over time and allows them to target and murder multiple subjects in real-time even as the game clock slows to a crawl. However, the symbolism of slowing time acquires fresh meaning and resonances worth considering when accompanied by the other instances of slow game time in the overall design of *RDR2*. Unlike past entries in the series, here Dead Eye contributes to a game that is fundamentally about slowing time down, stretching out individual moments as well as the larger temporal period that constitutes Morgan's life and the declining era whose sunset he shares. The Dead Eye ability thus illustrates well *RDR2*'s complex relationship between hegemonic game time and slow game time, a dynamic that takes the player from a breakneck train robbery one minute and, in the next, demands they trot across a vast western sprawl with little else happening. If nothing else, Dead Eye here illuminates how hegemonic game time can evoke slowness in the name of mastery, but it is not the radical slowness of slow game time. Rather, it is through canned animations, the structure of side quests and across its slow-motion tracking and combat mechanics that *RDR2* cultivates slow game time; a design decision that extends to the game's travel systems and their emphasis on producing memorable vistas.

Travel and Stillness

The extended metaphor of slowing down time equally applies to the game's traversal systems, which prevent expeditious player movement between locales, allow for exposition dumps via non-player

character (NPC) dialogue and encourage players to appreciate the beauty of Rockstar's virtual West. *RDR2* takes place in a gameworld that spans 29 square miles, and players are limited in their options for travel. When players first take control of Morgan in the game's introduction, he is on horseback, lantern in hand, trudging through thick snow drifts at night trailing the leader of his outlaw gang, Dutch Van der Linde. The gang is on the run from the law after a botched heist, and while the game dangles the narrative McGuffin of the loot they had to quickly stash before escaping, it also reminds us through Dutch's dialogue that, "It'll be safe for now...but we sure can't go back and collect it any time soon." Tellingly, the game underscores through its initial horseback excursion that nothing will happen in the game "anytime soon."

RDR2 provides several transportation options, but each highlights the game's preference for process over destination and its enactment of designed stillness, which routinely invites traveling players to pause, literally if not figuratively, to appreciate the majestic landscape as they journey. Players can explore *RDR2* on foot, horseback, stage coach, or train. Curious gamers have found that it takes approximately 16 minutes to cross *RDR2*'s map by horseback and a staggering three-plus hours at a walking pace (Life28SK, 2018). An elaborate train system loops around the gameworld, but this means of conveyance is restricted to established tracks and schedules. It contributes to the simulation and the player's experience of the West, but it does not greatly assuage the problem of travel time over the course of the game. Moreover, the obscured fast-travel system that is included, which allows players to warp between their base camp or discovered townships, is gated behind story missions and optional camp upgrades; meaning that some players will never discover or make use of it. In practice, players overwhelmingly rely on Morgan and his horse to navigate *RDR2*'s massive western frontier. By limiting player travel options, *RDR2* refuses modernity's logic of acceleration (Virilio, 2008), which seeks to reduce intervals between points of interest, and instead embraces a slow game time philosophy underscoring the game's focus on journey over destination and process over productivity.

While the horse is the game's primary means of exploration and travel, *RDR2* nonetheless institutes several restraints on horse travel that reinforces the game's overall slow tempo and again crafts moments of stillness as an invitation for the player to pause and absorb the game's ambiance. For instance, while on horseback players are not allowed to move through camp, which acts as a hub between missions and forces them to instead dismount and walk between tents and wagons in a more methodical way. When on story missions, the game often partners Morgan with one or more NPCs as they ride together sharing expositional information. Notably, these extended horseback dialogues suture the game's mechanics to its enormous narrative content. Players can temporarily sprint on horseback, but a stamina system tempers prolonged use of this max speed. A horse's stamina can increase overtime through use and care, but if the animal dies, by gunfire or falling off a cliff, all progress is lost. If a player's horse dies in the middle of the desert or in a mountain passage, for instance, players will have to walk out on foot and will not have the opportunity to acquire a new horse until they find a camp, town, or an unsuspecting passerby-turned-victim.

Saliently, the game includes an auto-run feature that will automatically guide Morgan's horse to a map destination selected by the player and wrests control of the camera to frame the player's progress cinematically against the natural beauty of the world. The auto-run feature contributes to *RDR2*'s cultivation of slow game time by removing agency from players as it pilots Morgan on horseback through its enormous world. This feature permits progress while gifting players either with a brief reprieve from its western doldrums

where they might escape for a bathroom break or with a traveling vignette that even more forcefully injects contemplative inaction into the player's experience. Indeed, despite showcasing exciting chase and shootout sequences and the ability to leap onto a moving train from horseback during a daring robbery (as Rockstar did in its multimillion-dollar advertising blitz) the basic horse mechanics in *RDR2* overwhelmingly err on the side of restraint, process and stillness rather than untempered speed and efficiency.

Narrative and Prolongment

RDR2 prolongs the last years of the Old West and Arthur Morgan's life while also denying the player a narrative of progress. *RDR2* tells a massive story and seemingly deploys every generic trope the western has to offer. The game features 109 missions, 94 of which are central story missions. These are spread out over six lengthy chapters and an equally protracted two-part epilogue. Tellingly, *RDR2*'s lead writer boasted of its massive 2000-page script, bragging that it would amount to a stack of paper "eight feet high" and suggested that even non-player characters had 80-pages worth of dialogue (Vincent, 2018). Expanded over 40-60 hours, the game's narrative centers on themes of dissipation, dissolution and decay. The player experiences these themes primarily from Arthur Morgan's perspective: as the criminal gang Morgan has called family for years crumbles; as his battle with tuberculosis worsens, compromising the player-character's abilities to run and fight; and as any chance of a different life with a former flame fizzles.

RDR2 is an extended exercise in the false hope of meritocracy. The player discovers as much after enduring grueling cycles where new opportunities for Morgan's gang inevitably end in ruin. Time and time again, *RDR2* teases the player with the possibility that the next game chapter might stem the tide of societal change or return things to the way they were. Yet, even as players amass an arsenal of weapons and earn new abilities and survival gear, these gains cannot prevent the inevitable tragedy from taking shape. A litany of personal misfortunes and collective setbacks define Morgan's journey and, by extension, that of the player. *RDR2*'s long-form campaign posits that as long as there's one more story to tell, the Old West cannot disappear completely. Ultimately, however, narrative possibility does little to slow epochal change; if anything, it makes the player more acutely aware of Morgan's impotence to save his friends, save himself, or stymie the larger forces transforming the West.

Centering on a prolonged, cyclical structure of hope and defeat, the story of *RDR2* is a long one not just because it features a wealth of content, *but*, more saliently, because its cycle of woes becomes suffocating with each new loss piling upon the last. On the run from the law and descending from the snowy mountains, the Van de Linde gang initially establishes a basecamp just outside of the fictional township of Valentine. This initial setup, constituting the game's second chapter, promises a story of redemption and renewal for Morgan and his companions. Yet after 17 missions focused on reestablishing the gang's resources, Chapter 2 concludes with a vicious shootout in Valentine after a violent businessman, whom the gang repeatedly robbed, employs a militia and local law enforcement to ambush Morgan's crew. Each subsequent game chapter (whether being chased from an old plantation home or forced to flee the game's equivalent of New Orleans after a failed bank robbery) revisits the structure of renewal and optimism followed by tragedy and defeat. This cycle keeps the gang on the run, its members dwindling, hour upon hour upon hour, until the fellowship of thieves dissolves.

Gang leader Dutch underscores this exhausting cycle with a refrain that he reiterates after every failure. "You have got to keep faith!" he screams, as his gang questions their downward spiral and their collective resolve to carry on. The game seemingly is addressing the

player directly in these moments, as they too must decide if they will continue playing after devoting dozens of hours to a lost cause. As with its mechanics and traversal system, *RDR2*'s narrative elevates journey over destination, especially when it becomes clear that the Van de Linde gang will not be riding off into the sunset.

Morgan's slow death due to consumption mirrors the death of his outlaw family, and *RDR2* takes its time in telling both intertwined stories. The disease manifests itself with increasing regularity as players approach the end of Morgan's journey. While initial coughing fits begin in Chapter 2, players only receive Morgan's official tuberculosis diagnosis in Chapter 5, in the game's 65th mission. Riding through the streets of Saint Denis, Morgan begins coughing uncontrollably before stumbling from his horse and eventually collapsing onto the cobble street. After a doctor informs Morgan of the deadly prognosis, players witness our hero's decline over the next 30 story missions, powerless to cure or heal their in-game avatar. No amount of game mastery or optimized play will save Morgan. Over this period, his disease occasionally hinders basic player actions and frustrates player intentions. His is a slow death. *RDR2* avoids any narrative economy that might expedite his journey to the grave, while also refusing the player any means of avoiding it.

RDR2 may be a lot of things -- an open-world cowboy simulator, the end-result of years of labor by 3000-plus game workers, a global entertainment product, a love-letter to the Western genre -- but it is also a game about time; about running out of it, about stretching it out and about ultimately impotent efforts to forestall the slow but inevitable creep of western expansion fueled by industrial capitalism. In this way, the game explores and exercises slow game time not as a panacea to the hegemonic temporalities of capitalism, either in the diegetic gameworld or the player's own reality, but as a brief reprieve, as moments of quiet (or frustrating) resistance. Yes, *RDR2* is accused of being so "goddamn slowwww" partially for the speed of its gameplay actions and its travel system. Yet it also earns this invective because, from its opening chapter until its narrative conclusion, it wallows in its inevitable loss of time while grasping for ways to prolong every second. *RDR2*'s slow game time emerges as one final, if failed, defensive bulwark against a pace of life that Morgan neither recognizes nor welcomes. He is a man who is literally and existentially out of time.

Press "X" to Wait

Red Dead Redemption 2 is relatively unique among blockbuster games for featuring as much slow game time as it does. But it isn't alone in this regard. In recent years, other triple-A games including *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015) and *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019), have incorporated the design politics of slow game time. The embrace of slow game time by blockbuster video games represents a significant design departure because, in practice, multiplatform commercial titles are not generally crafted with play mechanics that match the rhythms of our non-gaming lives. Instead, they are overwhelmingly engineered to demand full attention from players. In return for this temporal investment, video games gift players with considerable diegetic powers that the system evaluates with real-time feedback. The player eliminates the final enemy soldier in *Call of Duty: Warzone* (Infinity Ward, Raven Software, 2020); the player misses qualifying for the next stage in *Fall Guys* (Mediatonic, 2020). Hegemonic game time is pleasurable *precisely* because the game system lets us know, fast and frequently, how we are performing and includes mechanisms for optimizing those performances. Players submitting themselves to a game's rules and play mechanics are rewarded with higher scores, extra lives, narrative resolutions and faster, self-directed completion times.

The inclusion of slow game time in major video game titles is a

curious one because it potentially contributes to player frustration and to alienation -- affective states that can harm sales. *RDR2*'s players and critics were quick to blame its slower gameplay tempo on its simulational systems. Excessive realism turned an action-adventure game into a cowboy sim, or so goes the prevailing thought. Yet we argue that excessive verisimilitude is not responsible for slow game time. After all, with every new generation of consoles, studio heads, engineers and marketers promise would-be players heretofore unimaginable levels of visual and aural realism, as this is typically perceived to be a boon to sales.

RDR2 is not disconcerting for its simulational systems; it is disconcerting because the game refuses to fill every possible moment with dramatic and quantifiable feedback. Slow game time opens up the potential for radical critique not only of prevailing hegemonic design tropes and temporalities, but also, at its most extreme, of the dominant capitalist demand to use one's time productively. The discomfort and player frustrations that *RDR2* elicits are those anxieties produced by living under a regime of capitalist time that demands progress and productivity in all moments, even and perhaps *especially* during moments of leisure. *RDR2* often leaves players alone. It leaves them to pursue contemplation over action, engage in process over product, value idleness over efficiency, revel in stillness over speed and cherish potential waste over economization. These "actions," which are facilitated by its slow game time, likewise draw attention to the prevalence of hegemonic game time and its set of antithetical demands. While the experiential result is lambasted by many as insufferably slow gameplay, the critical upshot is that it ruptures any immersive fiction that holds at bay the realities of living under late capitalism. *RDR2* leans into this existential reality rather than glossing over it with excessive feedback loops and play mechanics that demand constant attention. Of course, *RDR2* is not some radical, political panacea to the hegemony of capitalist temporality and social relations. It is, in fact, inextricably enmeshed in the design principles, ideological projects and labor practices of the global capitalist video game industry. However, we argue that its unorthodox and considerable use of slow game time, in its mandate to thwart player expectations for speed and efficiency, complicates its own relationship to hegemonic play and hegemonic game time and demands critical attention.



Figure 3: The player enjoys quiet solitude next to their campfire (Rockstar Studios, 2018).

In his influential *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander Galloway (2006) contends that "video games are action" (p. 3). Moreover, gamic or ludic action is predicated on a fusion of the human player and the operations of the hardware and the software. Galloway notes: "One *plays* a game. And the software *runs*. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Even in its quiet moments, this remains true for *Red Dead Redemption 2*. For instance, the player may adjust the third-person view ever so slightly to capture the

perfect angle of Arthur Morgan sitting fireside under a full moon (Figure 3). The player is still playing; the software is still running. And this happens because the two are working in partnership. But *RDR2*'s quiet moments and its slow game time challenge what is conventionally understood to be *action* in triple-A computer and video games. We know the instrumental ends that are served when we press "X" to shoot, or to punch an enemy, or leap to a ledge. Pressing "X" to wait or electing not to press it at all opens a contemplative play space -- a play space free from the worry over productive ends, and for reflecting on the actions we are asked to perform in games and the speeds at which we are asked to do them.

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