



# The *Mustang* Diaries: A Study of Mexico in Red Dead Redemption 1

*The Mustang Diaries: un estudio de México en Red Dead Redemption 1*

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## ABSTRACT

Can a form of *play* be used to portray the past in popular culture? Can a person engage in such an act and acquire agency of a particular time in history? Play constitutes many forms—but for the sake of this paper, it will be used in the context of video games. Using the two main schools of thought for the study of these, narratology and ludology, I intend to highlight the potential for games to not only recreate history but also inter-

act with events and how they can provide new ways of understanding history. I will focus mainly on the Mexican Revolution and the U.S.-Mexico border relations in Rockstar's epic western: Red Dead Redemption 1.

**Keywords:** Mustang Diaries, Mexico, violence, stereotypes

## RESUMEN

¿Será posible usar el juego para mostrar el pasado en la cultura popular? ¿Podrá una persona realizando tal acto adquirir agencia sobre un tiempo particular de la historia? El juego se define de distintas maneras—pero para el propósito de este trabajo, se usará dentro del contexto de videojuegos. Usando las dos ideas principales sobre el estudio de estos: La narratología y la ludología, intento resaltar el potencial de los juegos no solo para recrear la historia, sino para interactuar con los eventos con el fin de mostrar cómo pueden

prestar nuevas maneras de entender la historia. Me concentraré particularmente en el periodo de la revolución mexicana dentro del juego western de Rockstar Games, *Red Dead Redemption 1*.

**Palabras clave:** *Mustang Diaries*, México violencia, estereotipos.

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## INTRODUCTION

Statista.com counted 131 million gamers in Latin America and projected growth of up to 172 million by 2025—making Latinos one of the fastest-growing group of gamers worldwide. This is not a mere coincidence; games and play have served purposes for human culture—especially in Latin America. Throughout history in the region, oral accounts show games' importance and impact. In some contexts, games served as a symbolic negotiation between the real world and the supernatural. For example, in the *Popol Vuh* (1554), Mayan twins Hunahpú and Xbalanqué use their unique talent in the ball game, and through it, both ascend into heaven, where one becomes the sun and the other the moon. In some other cases, games are used for persuasion and negotiation, as Felipe Guamán Poma relates in his *New Chronicle and Good Government* (1615), where Incan leader Atahualpa uses *taptana* (a form of chess) to negotiate with his Spanish captors. Five centuries later, Latinos still take games as a form of cultural negotiation in the real and virtual worlds. As a matter of fact, the ancient landscape often described in these accounts and chronologies served and still does as in-

spiration for videogame designers. Several games draw from this environment and focus specifically on the iconography of ancient cultures. It is shown throughout some early games; the jungle and pyramid backdrops of gold, jewelry, and green-eyed leopards served as props to add a layer of authenticity to the simulation. Still, nonetheless, the foundations of negotiation between a gamer and a system persist even until this day.

Latin America has been displayed in video games as far back as the 1980s—however, representation was mainly reduced to backdrops. Today, representation takes the form of narratives driven by geopolitical conflicts. First-person shooter games thrive in this component but tend to receive a negative reaction given the distortion of the culture, people, and state of current affairs. As scholars began taking notice of the impact of games, questions arose about how embodiment, immersion, and personification influence the player experience. The embodiment of an avatar in a virtual world demands critical decisions that will dictate the player's agency in the game. This study will analyze Mexican history and representation through gameplay in Rock-

star Games' western *Red Dead Redemption 1* (Rockstar, 2010). Blending a combination of historical film theory, performance, and ethnography, this paper intends to look at the dialogue, geography, narrative, and playability and how they create meaning for gamers to better understand Mexican culture and history during the early 20th century.

## VIRTUAL MEXICO: VIOLENCE, STEREOTYPES AND MORE

Political controversies are not new in video games, and Latin America is not exempt from such. Ludic representation of early titles showed ancient ruins and cultures—primarily the Maya and Aztecs making it one of the most enduring tropes of cultural representation. However, it wasn't until a game called *Urban Strike* (EA, 1994) launched a shoot 'em up where players controlled a helicopter that went about dismantling a worldwide operation led by a disgruntled American Politician. It had nine missions across the United States and one entirely in Mexico. Known as one of the first games that broke from the traditional ancient culture backdrop, *Air Strike* was set in a futuristic 2001 world that highlighted a modern Mexico. The mission is set at a military barracks of an army garrison replete with colonial-style architecture that consisted of adobe with red tile roofs. As the mission progresses, the player is prompted by the narrative, "My buddy is inside the armored barrack. He's being tortured," the helicopter descends, and a nonplayable character exits to go inside one of the structures. The responsiveness of this new environment and violence-centered narrative paved the way for a new form of cultural representation: Military intervention and a call to attention to the unstable neighbor south of the U.S. in dystopian scenarios.

This style of narrative set in an unstable Mexican country requiring military intervention has surged. This, in turn, ignited controversy within national politics. Then Ciudad Juarez Mayor, Hector Murguia said this about *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2* (Ubisoft, 2007) "This game will divide the good will of the residents of American and Mexican cities" (Arendt, 2007). The game is set in the modern city of

Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, where U.S. soldiers are sent to stop an attack led by rebels in the area. Murguia urged legislators to block the sale of the game in Mexico, given that it presented xenophobic views and was harmful to children. A similar controversy arose surrounding the release of *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* (Ubisoft, 2011) when legislators of the state of Chihuahua passed a request to ban the sale of the game nationwide. At this point, narrative and ludology characterized these Mexican set games where its people were all criminals and cannon fodder. As understandable as the outrage may have been, this game exposed the double standard of censorship of one media's form of representation over another. For example, while Mexican politicians were busy voting on resolutions to ban the sale of a videogame, the *narcoliteratura* of Elmer Mendoza was flourishing. At the same time, Luis Estrada's *El Infierno* (2010) was being touted as the Mexican parody of the current state of the government's war on drugs.

*Call of Juarez: The Cartel* took on the setting of the contemporary US-Mexico border at the height of an expanding drug war led by the omnipresent Mendoza Cartel. Designed by Techland, a Polish firm, and published by Ubisoft in Montreal, the lack of cultural research and appreciation is clearly substituted by xenophobia. Despite its focus on the Cartel, the Mexican characters play a one-dimensional role: They incite violence and only shoot. Set on the United States side of the border, players start the story controlling one of the three main characters tasked with halting the encroaching violence of the cartel. His name is Eddie Guerra, a DEA Agent from East Los Angeles and historically one of the first (and only) Hispanic videogame protagonists. The narrative is driven primarily by violence. As a team of three, Eddie and his colleagues spend the entire story gunning down countless Mexican affiliates that respond with redundant and basic Spanish expletive phrases: *¡Put a Madre! ¡Put a! ¡Hijo de puta!* Etc. They lack complexity, cultural depth in their configuration, and basic identity. They're simply reduced to *Mexican*. Eddie Guerra's identity is also superficial; players only know he's from East LA, which carries the stereotyped inflection of the dialogue, such as "ese" and "Holmes." His most notable dialogue carries codeswitching syntax, such as "The enemy of my enemy is my carnal."

Something worth mentioning about *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* is that despite the heavy stereotype and lack of actual representation, the game highlighted contemporary elements of reality that contribute to a different kind of unique portrayal: Border militarization. In between missions, as the subsequent one loads, cutscenes of dialogue inform players of what the government is trying to do to take control of the “situation.” Directives like “*invasion of Mexico*” and “*threat to national security*” sound through Fox News-like cable news reports. Joseph B Reynolds, the game’s Attorney General, weighs military action and finds “legal” ways to justify such means. His perspective is amplified and supported by conservative senatorial candidate Ron Lindsay calls for Reynolds to go beyond prosecuting criminals and pressures Washington to enact a full-scale military invasion of Mexico. The parallel to the real world here is the government’s heavy concentration along the border by generating an increased presence and deploying drone aircraft to monitor it. As a reference to Fernando Romero’s *Hyper-border: The Contemporary U.S. Mexico Border and its Future* (2008), the author claims that in 2008, there were more U.S. Border Patrol agents than soldiers in Afghanistan (Romero, 53). The game, then, uses these elements to create a game experience revolving around actual geopolitical conflicts.

Stereotypes are highly exploited in these games because it serves the purpose of furthering a plot line or narrative at the expense of cultural understanding. The Mexican drug dealers that Eddie and his team were mowing through only helped further progress the story but lacked in creating a sense of background and appreciation. Players left the game with a notion that ALL Mexicans are bad, drug dealers and illegals, which cost Ubisoft’s overall message of border militarization and government encroachment. What this calls for is a balance in both narratology and ludology. With careful research in history, culture, and geography, developers can provide a better simulation where players can acquire agency through self-representation via gameplay.

## CULTURE RENDERED IN THE OPEN WORLD

The open-world game genre is known to give players “freedom” to explore and interact with a particular type of environment. Traditional games are bound to the narrative coded into them, which tends to be a linear structure that minimizes the player’s game world immersion. Open-world games, although with storylines, present unique opportunities for gamers to break from them and pursue other adventures. For developers, this presents a unique opportunity because it opens the possibility of inserting cultural content. One of the notable design companies to deploy a multicultural context to its game is Rockstar Games. Through their *Grand Theft Auto* series, Latin American culture is brought differently in all the franchises’ game spaces. In *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar, 2001), players drive around Liberty City and experience a substantial Latino NPC population. The plot centers on conflicts between Japanese and Italian crime syndicates, but as the story progresses, players are introduced to Catalina, a female Latina associated with a Colombian drug cartel. Through side quest missions, players interact (via phone) with *El Burro*, the gang leader known as *Los Diablos*. Very little is known of *El Burro*. Only accessible through random phone calls across pay phones in the cities, his voice is heavily accented. It offers very little cultural depth other than the parodical representation of Latinos in film.

In *GTA: Vice City* (Rockstar, 2002), a fictionalized 1980’s Miami embeds Latin culture throughout the entire city. Players watch their avatar arrive at Escobar International Airport from Liberty City, which is an obvious reference to the Colombian kingpin Pablo Escobar. *Vice City* diversifies the Latino culture in its game by displaying a Caribbean, Central, and South American population in the game. With it comes the turf battles associated with the gang culture. The Haitians desire to expand from Little Haiti into Little Havana and dispute the territory with the Cubans. The cultural signifier is that each space is designated by the region’s cultural signifiers. In Little Haiti, the NPCs speak patois, which is the region’s common dialect. They listen to the Latino radio stations and sport attire purple, red, and white

attire which references the Haiti flag. Although contextually stereotyped through hyperbolized accents, overweight forward-slouched men, and mini skirt high-heel-wearing women, Rockstar creates the environments in which culture is not only portrayed but also experienced. Through cutting-edge graphics and extensive research, the company created a unique way of making meaning via the spatialization of culture. Despite the heavy criticism it received at the hands of politicians due to its liberal use of violence and drug references, it allowed players to experience the landscape and make discoveries with real-life significance. It strengthens the agency players acquire through gameplay because this specialization adds depth to the game's narrative.

The previous games, except one, had one thing in common: The timeline. While the first two were set in the future, *GTA III* was set in its present time, and *GTA: Vice City* was set in the past. Although the cities were fictionalized, the video game replicated Vice City into an authentic Miami, but why go to those lengths? Why concentrate on the past when current events offer plenty of content to develop a successful and intriguing storyline? Historically, realism and historical information add interest and character to problems posed by players. The balance comes when the game world is overly reliant on "actual" or historical facts. This allows those players that are well versed in the period in which the game takes place to have preconceived notions and formulate an idea of how to play, and casual gamers who can immediately recognize certain aspects of the period. An example of this balance in *GTA: Vice City* is the name "Escobar." In the 80s, Pablo Escobar was known for controlling drug smuggling through various channels in the United States. Players with period history knowledge make connections between the game's reliance on nightlife and the name to conclude that Pablo Escobar's cocaine business fueled the 1980s nightlife and underground economies. In sound, the game prides itself on "Only American" but boasts English performers like Tears for Fears and Australian sensation INXS blasting through the audio. Again, the balance is historically accurate 80's feel, but not entirely American.

With this level of contextualization, we will analyze Rockstar's portrayal of Mexican history, con-

nections with present-day Mexico (of the time it was launched), and cultural representation.

## JOHN MARSTON RIDES SOUTH. BUT FIRST, LET'S FLOAT ACROSS THE BORDER

Rockstar Games co-founder and Project Lead for *Red Dead Redemption 1* Dan Houser said of the game: "This game, we wanted to feel like more of a gritty, revisionist Western, taking some cues from films such as *Unforgiven* or *the Wild Bunch*" (Phelan, 2010). If I may be bold and add to Mr. Houser's words that they also incorporated a revisionist history of the Mexican Revolution using elements of Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo*, as well as Gustavo Casasola's *Historia gráfica de la revolución mexicana*; since *Red Dead Redemption* (RDR) expanded the west and frontier across the river to Mexico in the early stages of what the game called the Mexican Civil War. It uses elements of Azuela's novel because it focuses on pre-revolutionary rural Mexico where its ideals are questioned, and there's no conviction to create meaningful change within the social structure of Mexico. It visualizes Azuela's description of poor peasants and the desert-like atmosphere. It also adds the level of specificity of the period's clothing—especially the Mexican federal and revolutionary forces. Notably, closer to the border, the hats worn reflect those of American style versus the longer straw *Zapatista-type sombrero* used in central and south Mexico.



Figure 1: *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010)



Rockstar has always championed the down-and-out their luck character that gamers control. *GTA IV* showed Niko Bellic—a Serbian-born immigrant who fought and fled the Yugoslavian wars with a long history of crime. During his quest, he engages in a series of story-driven missions where violence is the main activity. The same goes for *GTA: Vice City* and *GTA: San Andreas*. Both Tommy and CJ, the protagonists of each game, are reformed gangsters who find themselves caught in the same situation—the necessity to return to the violent identity that plagued their upbringings. *RDR1* takes a page from that, players control a similarly imagined character, a recovering bandit with a history of violence caught in a world in which going straight is more challenging than re-engaging with violent acts.

The main protagonist/avatar is John Marston. An ex-outlaw turned hired gun by the Bureau of Investigation in exchange for his wife and son. Marston does not have a choice. In the intro cutscene, he exits a passenger boat in Blackwater and is led by two men to a train station, where he boards and heads down south to New Austin—the border with Mexico. Not very much is provided to players—game mechanics and ludology will provide them with the information needed from Marston to understand his background fully. Following the *GTA* model, Marston has an already programmed, unconscious repertoire of skills players must discover. When first controlled, his unique shooting ability, called *deadeye*, must be *perfected* through a series of quests and story-driven missions that require him to either kill people or wild animals. In essence, players are required to engage in violent acts to develop Marston's skillset. Through this discovery phase, ludology helps players experience a deep sense of identification and loyalty to the avatar as well. This relationship comes with ethical complexity since Marston will be engaging in criminal behavior, but thanks to the game's morality meter, players can keep a check on how good or bad they can be in the game world. Each action has either a positive or a negative outcome. If a player decides to progress Marston in a morally driven way, then the game will reward him with a "*best in the west*" identity that comes with the perks of fame and respect. If the player goes in the opposite direction, the game world will react in a defen-

sive manner causing NPCs to be hostile and aggressive toward Marston.

*RDR1* is set in the fictitious American states of West Elizabeth and New Austin and the Mexican state of Nuevo Paraiso in 1911. Throughout the game world, there are elements of period piece items like a Model T car, a modern-day passenger liner boat, and a dying frontier where modernity is making its way. Like the *GTA* spatiality, culture is territorialized. The port city of Blackwater offers a vast array of diversity. While Marston roams through it, multiple languages can be heard, and many of the city's high-end shops display European-themed attire. Law and order reign in this town. Players can't draw weapons before the local law enforcement seeks them out. Blackwater is completely absorbed by the 20th century, while south of it, progress is slow to reach. As players ride further south, the accent changes drastically, emblematic of the old Southern form of speech. The border town in the US is called Armadillo. A dusty town with only one store, a sheriff's office, a rundown saloon, and a train station. The culture here is not representative of the border regions. The English language dominates the area where small instances of Spanish are spoken. These are from NPCs mostly waiting for a train to ride north. Luke Plunket says that video games draw inspiration from history but do not attempt to recreate an authentic event completely (Plunket, 2009). The usefulness of games in presenting historical information allows players the flexibility to discern the way in which they play the game.

My intent was to figure out as much of the Mexican Revolution history through this game as possible—while also attempting to know the culture of the region. For the sake of this paper, I will skip missions in the prologue to where Marston is on a raft attempting to cross the San Luis River into Mexico. He and his friend *Irish* are floating across when a band of Mexican *banditos* begins firing on them. After the skirmish, jokingly, Irish tells John: "*the Mexicans know how to make a bottle of liquor, too. That pulque! Now there's a drink that would take the frost out of frosty mornin'. Ah, you're gonna have some fun.*" Only people with knowledge of Mexican culture can make the connection between pulque and its effect, while those that do not have that

knowledge reference pulque as a type of alcoholic beverage. To Mexicans, the drink is as emblematic as its indigenous civilization. Ian Bogost writes about the use of fast food in *GTA San Andreas* and its status as a source of food for low socioeconomic people (87). Pulque is not consumed in of the establishments of the game world. Mexico is not an indication of poverty but more of a symbol of national identity. Pulque has been traced back as far as the Aztec empire, with peak demand during the Mexican revolution. The historical context of Pulque here is twofold: With the advent of the railroad in Mexico, Pulque found a place outside the *haciendas* in central Mexico and outward to the country. With President Porfirio Diaz's courting of foreign investment, breweries emerged, pitting pulque and beer against each other. With full government support, breweries launched misleading marketing campaigns framing pulque as a low-class unhygienic beverage fermented with feces. History shows that pulque overcame adversity and became the beverage of the revolutionary forces and a symbol of national identity in the post-revolutionary period. Irish's reference to pulque is not an indicator of a poor country but a symbol of resistance that survived the destruction and colonial power, as well as remains rooted in today's society. Resistance was shown by Mexican rebels defending their sovereignty while attempting to stop two Americans from crossing into their homeland.



Figure 2: *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010)

Marston pays no mind to this bit of information—he is not interested and says it after he cuts Irish off in the middle of his comment. The next bit of information about Marston comes again from Irish: “down

here, they call me *El Rato*. The Cat. On account of me stealth and cunning.” To which Marston replies, “I’m pretty sure *Rato* means “rat” my friend. I like it, though. A little more inventive than Irish.” John Marston can understand Spanish. This gives the player insight into his connection with the language as well as its people during his days in the gang. Once they make it to the dock, Irish instructs Marston about a horse hitch, weapons, and a shack for him to use if he needs it. The two men bid farewell. The adventure in Mexico has begun!

### THE MORALITY EFFECT INTERPRETING NUEVO PARAISO

I wrote earlier about the hyperbolic representation of Latinos in video games, particularly those portrayed by Rockstar games. The *GTA* series has been characterized as racist more frequently than lauded for the diversity it brings. David J. Leonard wrote about *GTA: San Andreas* “the game reinscribes stereotypes of African American males as criminal and violent” (2015). Others add the role of humor in its portrayal of race and culture by including the satirical element to its already “criminal” tag, adding a level of assertion to Leonard’s phrase. *El Burro* is a criminal, and every mission he assigns the player involves him destroying property or killing other members of a gang. Since *RDR1* is an old west copy of *GTA*, were gamers bound to the same criticism? Gamespot.com forum states the following question about the game: “the game is chock full of stereotypes of Latinos, and nobody is complaining?” As soon as Marston entered Mexican lang, the only news from the country’s unrest came in the form of newspaper columns reporting on its President, General Ignacio Sanchez’s propagandistic effort to downplay the civil unrest of his constituents. After docking the boat, Marston can soak in the scenery and culture of this great land. Before crossing to Mexico, the language primarily spoken was English. Every now than then, in the Armadillo Saloon or in Macfarlane’s Ranch, we could hear *señor* in the distance. As he rides inland, passerby interactions are purely in Spanish: *hola! ¿Qué tal? Bienvenido a México!* This sudden shift emulates the cultural shock of being in a foreign land and left with no devices to fully immerse and try to understand.

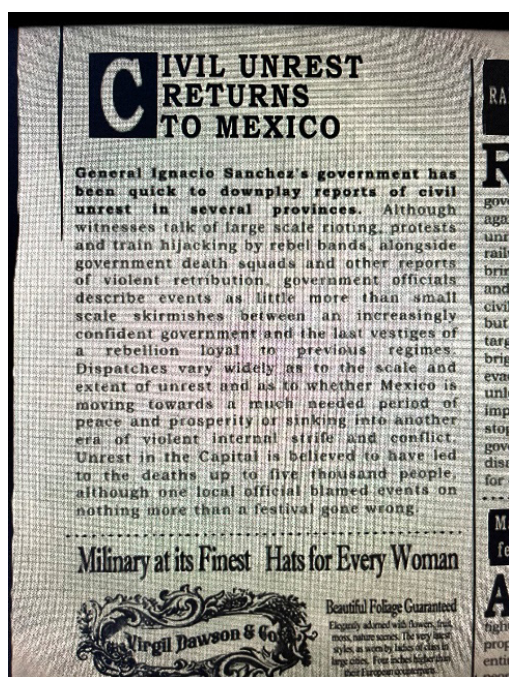


Figure 3: Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar, 2010)

Cutting-edge technology has allowed the incorporation of non-diegetic music in video games. A staple of the *GTA* series, music serves the purpose of both providing a sense of reality by sometimes sampling songs from real artists and also indirectly highlighting cultural representation. *RDR1* plays an array of non-diegetic tunes relative to the places Marston visits. On the US side of the world, banjos, saloon melodies, and guitars play every so often to anchor the location of the avatar. On the other side of the San Luis River, the tunes are different. Philip Penix-Tadsen describes possible approaches to composing musical scores for a game with the purpose of providing a cultural environment (110). For the case of Mexico in *RDR1*, to make it unique to the region, composers felt the need to incorporate traditional musical representations associated with both cultural and historical periods being rendered. As I rode to *Chuparosa*, one of the towns along the Mexican border, I went to one of the *cantinas*. The game allows players to approach the bar and purchase a drink. Although pulque was not an option, I nonetheless ordered a drink and soaked in the feeling of being in a pre-revolution-

ary country. Suddenly, a trumpet, an accordion, and a loose-string guitar played in the background. It was a *mariachi* ensemble. As soon as it played, the patrons began their traditional *grito* which is a series of whooping calls when their emotions run high. The *grito* is one of Mexico's emblematic cultural characteristics. It traces its roots to the 1810 war cry Father Miguel Hidalgo made to call for liberation from Spain. Normally called out as an act of celebration, the *grito* unites Mexicans. Following these were clanging noises of men toasting to life and a man called Abraham Reyes. Words like *salud* sounded off from various parts of the cantina. I ordered one more drink and headed out to explore the town a bit more.

Through nonbinding exploration, players have acquired what appears to be a healthy dose of pre-revolutionary 19th-century Mexico. However, these are merely rendered through spatiality. To acquire agency, a negotiation between the player and the game world must be complimented through interactions. Sadly, John Marston does not have the ability to either greet or antagonize the NPCs like its successor *Red Dead Redemption 2*; but reactions could be evoked through basic ludology. As Marston explores the town of *Chuparosa*, the townspeople randomly greet him and provide him with basic information about the current state of the country. Through the push of a button, he can only acknowledge by tipping his hat forward. However, the game allows players to "bump" into NPCs by sprinting toward them. This results in either a reaction or a confrontation. Marston sprints towards a random Mexican. "*Cuidado, gringo.*" To which he replies, "*Sorry, señor,*" and he tips the front of his hat, acknowledging. I did the same thing but to a female *cantina* worker. "*Oye guapo. Te llevo al Cielo con todo y zapatos*" Again, Marston replies "*No thank you, ma'am. I'm a married man.*" The last reaction I provoked was by drawing my gun on random people. I did this same experiment in the U.S. with the NPCs in both *Blackwater* and *Armadillo*. In both cases, as soon as I drew, a wanted level flashed atop my screen with a bounty reward for my apprehension. I wanted to see what would happen here. I went back inside the *cantina*, approached the poker table filled with *banditos*, and drew my gun at them. The dealer raised his hands



and ran outside while the three men playing stood and faced me. Before turning agro (videogame word for hostile), they warned: “*Quieres morir, gringo?*” Marston couldn’t reply, but the gun remained pointed at them. The mini-map indicated three red dots. They reached for their guns, and I began to shoot. It is worth noting that the wanted/bounty sign did not go off in Mexico. In the U.S., when gunfights happen, the NPCs in the surrounding areas run, and screams are heard throughout. When the player kills somebody in Mexico, others turn on him, but those not in proximity keep minding their business. Two key ingredients to point here in this one instance that shows Mexican culture: The macho *no me rajo* (I’m not a coward) state of the Mexican psyche as well as the normalcy of violent events in the region.

In cinema, films are a testament to the period represented with a connection to the present. In video games, a similar connection can be made but with the difference that players can actively engage with these environments to create more meaning. RDR1 was launched in 2010 during the Mexican celebrations of both its bicentennial anniversary of the wars of independence as well as the centennial anniversary of the Mexican revolution. For Mexican gamers playing in 2010, their connection to current events might have added a level of realism and representation, given the state of the Mexican country during the time of Felipe Calderon’s war on organized crime. From 2006 – 2012, Mexico saw a heightened wave of violent crimes that resulted in nearly 60,000 deaths because of the government’s attempt to crack down on powerful Cartels’ chokes along the border region. Addressing the question at the beginning on whether the game was stereotypical, I would be one to say that despite the *hollywoodesque* illustration of accents, *sombreros*, and ponchos, interactions like the ones I encountered add a level of natural representation that I and others can certainly appreciate in a AAA game. Ironically, the noticeable discrepancy in Mexico is the English/Spanish vocabulary ratio coming from the NPCs. Although the initial interactions with Marston are in Spanish, most of the dialogue is in English with intense vocabulary. Considering that these regions (despite being close to the US) claim to “rarely” see Americans, their fluency is

native. Although this is mostly the developers appealing to the English-speaking audience wanting to not miss out on the details, the level of Spanish is just as complex making it a favorable game to play amongst the Spanish-speaking audience. Mexican NPCs in RDR1 are not reduced to expendable characters with no depth. They are culturally programmed to the point of not being naturally hostile as other games showed them. They do not provoke the protagonist but tend to defend themselves and their fellow compatriots in the face of aggression—which is culturally and historically represented in Mexico’s history.

## THE SPECT-ACTOR’S INABILITY TO CHANGE EVENTS

Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal calls the audience in his *Theater of the Oppressed* (1974) active observers or *spectactors*. Its main principle is to transform them into protagonists and rehearse alternatives for their situations. Can that same principle apply to video games? After all, the player serves the role of the active observer because it is through his actions the avatar will execute the commands. This, in turn, presents a unique opportunity for the development of cultural and historical content through gameplay. In the game’s opening missions, John Marston could not ride off to Mexico. Revolutionary forces demolished the international bridge to keep the flow of guns away from the *federales*. Through progression, players can move the narrative further to unlock new quests and features.

True immersion can be achieved by a careful blend of narratology and ludology. Narratology is a game’s heavy reliance on story and narrative to drive the game, while ludology focuses on creating agency through playability. Players can experience freedom, but this only increases as the narrative opens more through plot, progression, and character addition. By the time Marston finds out the men he’s looking for are in Mexico, he has already encountered over seven people who send him off to both story-based and nonstory-based missions. Here, one can contend if Boal’s *spectator* model applies in this context. Through the morality meter in RDR1, a player can choose to carry out violent

or honorable behavior. This, however, does not go unchecked, as the honor level is impacted by every action taken by the player. If he gathers too much negative honor, the consequences are higher prices on weapons, supplies, and ammunition, which makes it significantly harder for him to continue engaging in violent behavior. However, if a player is honorable, random acts of kindness are displayed by NPCs by providing him with free items like clothing and provisions. If the level of fame reaches its max point, Marston's reputation is known worldwide. These actions fit the schema of Boal. It is up to the player to decide their path and live with the consequences of those decisions. However, despite his reputation, the main storyline will remain unchanged regardless of behavior. In other words, opening Mexico will not come faster if players play honorably vs. dishonorably—and the characters involved with these missions will not interact differently with Marston regardless of reputation.

As mentioned earlier, historical games do not have an interest in changing the outcome of historical events—and those presenting various meanings behind these algorithms create reflections amongst the players. These are known as persuasive games. These are known as persuasive games. Channeling Bogost's idea, these games are programmed with *procedural rhetoric* (21), which is the practice of using processes persuasively. This rhetoric, put in this context, is executed not through images or text but by rules and behavior. In other words, the designer intends to change perspectives codified in the hardware. RDR1 is not a persuasive game because its rhetoric is not procedural but somewhat digital. Images, stories, and text create a simulation where players can acquire agency through their experiences. While many historical games may allow players to alter the course of history, RDR1 does not. There are two examples in my gameplay that highlight the inability to change history as a means to instill reflection amongst the "history buff" demographic.

The first was my attempt to cross the border into Mexico earlier. At the beginning of the game, *Puente Frontera* serves as the bridge between Mexico and New Austin, and when I arrived, it was destroyed. John Marston can enhance his shooting and riding abilities

through practice, but not his swimming. As soon as he drops into the river, he instantly drowns. No boats are floating by, and train tracks have also been destroyed. Mexico has closed its border with the U.S. as a sort of reverse migration. Is it persuading players that crossing into Mexico is illegal? No.

On the contrary, the game's digital rhetoric demonstrates the dangers of crossing through raging waters. It also shows Mexico's demand for the U.S. to stop sending weapons to its "insurrectionists" and its willingness to protect its sovereignty by destroying the only viable source of commerce and travel between the two countries. During gameplay, there is nothing John Marston can do to prevent this bridge from being destroyed—and there is nothing he can do to get himself across. One of the instances where history cannot be altered but has the power to drive the message of deadly immigration journeys. As a connection to current affairs, the reflection caused echoes of the horror stories shared by migrants that witnessed fellow travelers drown in the river or bodies of men, women, and children washed up ashore on the banks of the Rio Grande. Deadly migration is something Latin Americans can relate to and identify with.

A second instance happened in the town west of *Chuparosa*. Through the trail along the border, past *Misión de las Hermanas*, Marston found *Escalera*. The main town of *Nuevo Paraíso*. *Escalera*, like *Nuevo Paraíso*, is a metaphor for Mexico it was trying to represent. The paradise could be interpreted as a haven for lawlessness and violence where American outlaws flocked or a paradise built by a social movement led by people demanding a change. Translating from the English word ladder, *Escalera* is a town founded on layers down a cliff. At the top is the command headquarters and estate of Colonel Agustin Allende. The region's commander against the rebels. There, he enjoys the benefits of security, and lavishness in the form of women, food, and supplies, while the townsfolk beneath at the bottom of the cliff live in extreme poverty. In the middle are both the cantina and a gun shop—another metaphor that in Mexico, to aspire to such social mobility, one must fantasize through alcohol or take it by force via an armed conflict. John Marston doesn't tell the difference. At the

base of the cliff, he can buy a room to rest (save game progress) or change clothes. This is feature players use to advance time—to go from day to night and vice versa. Secondary quests and skill progression requires hunting and missions that are only available at certain times of the day.

Marston wakes up and steps outside to collect his horse from the hitch to begin the quest for the Legendary Jaguar—*Khan*, a mythical animal that dwells along the canyon known as *Ojo del Diablo* (Devil's Eye) just south of *Escalera*. In the distance—closing in, whooping sounds could be heard, soft at first, but were getting closer by the second. There is no indication of activity on the map, yet these voices take the shape of armed *federales*. It was a group of about three or four. They approached a random man in the town and confronted him. I was still far from making out any dialogue, but I rushed right toward them. As soon as I did, the suspect began to run, and the *federal* unholstered his gun and shot him in the back. This is not just any random event—especially for Mexican players. This incident refers to a Porfirian age tactic used to repress people known as the *Ley Fuga*.

The “law” gave accused people the option to run for their freedom, but they were immediately shot in the back as soon as they turned. This important historical event took 10 seconds to unfold, and I am comfortable saying that most gamers (outside of Mexico) miss this historical reference. Augusto Boal's *spectator* model fails because as I tried to shoot the *federales*, I was quickly gunned down by the townspeople while negatively impacting my honor and fame. The ludic consequence in this situation is that the player is punished for interfering in an act of “justice.” The game's rhetorical procedure was set to evoke a sense of disbelief or anger, as well as teach the gamer a lesson by experiencing a semblance of the terror and violence villagers in Mexico felt hearing these *banditos* ride in, commit acts of violence and leave without explanation or remorse.



Figure 4: *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010)

This incident can be interpreted as a form of stereotype. Americans never fully understood the Mexican Revolution, and its portrayals often dealt with Mexicans being villains and savages. This sequence captures that. It shows the savageness of the Mexican army oppressing their own. However, connecting it to the 2010 Mexican times, this scene alone can relate to the concept of police/army brutality. Human rights activists and watchdogs heavily criticized the Mexican government, its army management, and the police's treatment of prisoners and suspects of drug trafficking. A simple scene where a player is rendered powerless is now caught in a time of examination and remembrance: The past repeats itself. The reflection lies not in the act but in the population's unconscious acceptance of such acts.

## THE MEXICAN CAUDILLO: THE ARROGANT AND THE LOST

I mentioned earlier the name of two important characters Marston encounters while searching for the two men the Bureau of Investigation sent out to look for: Colonel Agustin Allende and Abraham Reyes. The two men represent both factions of the Mexican Revolution, where Marston becomes embroiled. Mexican historian Enrique Krauze says that *caudillos* are the best and the worst thing that happened to Mexico. Countless revisions and books are written about Mexico's love for the romantic *caudillo*, like Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa, the two most famous names of the Mexican Revolution. Can these same personalities be

coded into a character in a virtual environment? RDR1 hired cultural experts and Mexican historians to craft as much of that pre-revolutionary Mexico as possible carefully. RDR1 has two versions of *caudillos* in the personification of Colonel Agustín Allende on the *Federales* side and Abraham Reyes, the leader of the Mexican *rebeldes*. Players get a taste of experiencing both sides of the conflict. In the beginning, Marston sides with the federal forces to help track down the two men he's looking for. He meets Allende in *Escalera* after one of his subordinates, Captain Vicente De Santa, tells him that Colonel Allende knows the whereabouts of both Bill Williamson and Javier Escuella. The most notable mission Marston does on the side of the *federales* is called The Mexican Caesar—a reference to Mexican Former President Antonio López de Santa Anna's obsession with becoming the Napoleon of the West.

Ludology played a big part in understanding the inability to change history, but narratology has more importance in the knowledge of backgrounds that yield cultural and historical context. Players discover that Colonel Allende was once an idealist who believed Mexico should be free—only to be consumed by his love of power, money, women, and sex through cutscenes. Historical pictures—particularly those in the *Historia gráfica de la revolución mexicana* portray military men with vice paraphernalia. Pictures of Victoriano Huerta with a cigar and a cognac cup, or a general with an alcoholic beverage or a woman by his side were popular. Colonel Allende's house has those same elements. Through gameplay, Marston can walk up to his compound and notice the abundance of women and alcohol bottles. At the start of the mission, Colonel Allende is fondling a woman while he tries to explain his strategy. With a wave of his hand, he orders his men out, picks the woman up over his shoulders, and goes inside the house.



Figure 4: *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010)

As the revolution garners support, Allende appears to be consumed by stress. His constant dependence on alcohol and women shows during the cutscenes where the mission is briefed. His military sword and decorations are now worn and ripped, and his paranoia escalates. He begins shooting people randomly for simply “looking at him.” This alludes to popular tales of Pancho Villa putting backward horseshoes on horses to avoid being tracked or Zapata never sleeping in the same place twice. To render the mystified element of fear and paranoia to a game is a feat Rockstar achieved impressively. Ultimately, Allende falls victim to his desire to rule Mexico through betrayals—another nod to the *Caudillos* of the time that promised glory to their own, only to betray for personal fulfillment. In the end, Allende lived by the sword and died by the sweeping wind in Mexico.

On the other side of the *Caudillo* spectrum is Abraham Reyes. The revolutionary Messiah who will restore peace to Mexico. During Marston's free roam of the region, Abraham Reyes is a mythical figure. The NPCs talk about him. There are posters in cantinas of him posing in an Uncle Sam-like position, rewarding volunteers to fight with him. In the countryside, riders park their horses and build campfires to rest. When Marston is invited, these people provide information about the good in Reyes: “He will give back the land.” “Es un santo!” Yet, during Marston's *federales* campaign, his skirmish is only with Reyes' sympathizers. It is not until he realizes that he's being played by the *federales* that he meets Luisa Fortuna, a staunch *Reyista* who firmly believes Abraham is the true savior of the country. Samuel Ramos' *pelado* from the *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico (1934)* inspires Marston's first impression of Reyes. To Ramos, the *pelado* is a man who tends to imitate a way of life while trying to find a sense of superiority among those around him. Reyes is that man. He finds pleasure in being desired by women and being admired by his men but, at the same time, lacks to find a purpose for his mission. He forgets his followers' names, cheats on his women, and forgets that there is a revolution for the freedom of Mexico. To him, it is just one more step towards the presidency and total rule.





Figure 5: *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010)

Marston's impression of Reyes is the opposite of what tales make him out to be. He womanizes and makes the same promise to all of them, which he never keeps. He dreams of a Mexico where he will be president and have all the pleasures of life at the expense of the *pueblo*. He is more concerned about *corridos* of him than the heroic deeds of the *soldaderas* that give their lives for his cause, which is another accurate historical representation of the game. During Marston's missions with the *federales*, several of the hideouts they cleared had women fighters guarding these compounds. I walked past the dead bodies of revolutionaries and saw women's bodies dressed in bandoliers, *charro* hats, and long skirts. During the gun fights, war cries of "*Viva México!*" or "*Al ataque, camaradas*" in the female tone rallied the troops. As I was covering from bullets, I listened to these heroic women give instructions and noticed male NPCs obey and move into position according to the instructions they were receiving. Rockstar's portrayal of Reyes is through a conservative approach where Marston questions his every intention with words like radical, tyranny, and liberty, to which Reyes smirks: "*You gringos want to control everything.*" At the end of Marston's Mexican storyline, he switches to the rebel cause in hopes of eliminating Allende. When they succeed, and the men he's looking for are killed, the storyline brings him back to the other side of the border.

Marston bids farewell to Reyes in the last cutscene but holds him accountable for serving the people of Mexico by respecting the rights and liberties of the citizenry. Later, newspapers across New Austin revealed

Reyes became president, where he rules with an iron fist by executing the opposition, constantly delaying elections, and currently allowing countrywide starvation. He runs propaganda promising the entrance into a new "golden age" of prosperity for the Mexicans. I can understand the insensitivity Rockstar Games may have been accused of by showing such depictions of a country ravaged by violence. But then again, is it the satire that makes its games popular, a feature RDR1 uses to highlight a bigger picture? Reyes' persona is a critique of the Mexican state of political history. Known for 70 years of single-party rule, Reyes personifies what the National Revolutionary Party (PRI) stood for. In addition, it highlights the transfer of power and the economic state of a "better future" through the privatization and implementation of neoliberal policies. "*Entering a new golden age*" echoes what President Salinas de Gortari and then Vicente Fox alluded to at the time of their early tenure. Although RDR1 is about the past, its connection with the present is what gamers, particularly Mexicans, can relate to. In addition, history gamers worldwide can learn through playability and interaction.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARDS GAMING WITH A PURPOSE

With the growing reach of video games worldwide, the medium is uniquely positioned to use its platform and create meaning. Despite the negative attention it receives through its storylines and ludological capabilities, it has shown the potential to reshape how people view history and how people can learn it. Historical events inspire the most popular games—as a source of inspiration, the question is, can the medium cover a serious topic where gamers can learn? This study's focus was to highlight ludology and narratology to understand a period of Mexican history. I challenge all gamers and *spectators* to read between the lines, as valuable lessons are coded in the complex system we know as videogames. \

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