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"It's [not just] in the game": the promotional context of video games

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Marketing Authenticity: Rockstar Games and the Use of Cinema in Video Game Promotion

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Abstract

Considering promotional materials as a source of information themselves, this article tracks how Rockstar Games position titles through cinema references. Referring to the relationship between video games and cinema, and tendencies to evaluate video games according to their “cinematic” qualities, it demonstrates Rockstar’s attempt to have an active role in coding their products as such. Through discourse analysis of selected Rockstar-authored promotion and other paratextual sites of information, it illustrates the ways in which the promotion of *Max Payne 3* (2012), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), and *L.A. Noire* (2011) encouraged identification of their relative cinematic influences and/or qualities.

Keywords: Rockstar Games; Cinema ; Authenticity; Promotion ; Interviews

Scholarship on what is frequently referred to as the “convergence” between video games and cinema, the “interfaces” or “intersections” between them, has been growing since the first edited collection was published in the early 2000s (King and Krzywinska, 2002; Papazian and Sommers, 2013). These sorts of academic inquiries have looked, for example, at the ways in which cinematic technologies and techniques have influenced the medium of video games itself (and vice versa), and how particular generic, narrative, and/or stylistic conventions are carried between them, shaped and altered by their disseminations.

Though these kinds of uncritical qualifications are now frequently challenged (for example see Smith, 2015), there has often been an “assumption” that “ ‘more cinematic’ equals ‘better’ and more distinctive gameplay” (King and Krzywinska, 2002, 6). This trend of noting that comparatively-newer media are becoming ever more cinematic, and thus attempting to imbue texts with greater prestige, is not confined to video games alone. For example, since the early 2000s there has been a tendency to “frame” shifts in the “complexity” of television storytelling as the medium “becoming more ‘literary’ or ‘cinematic’, drawing both prestige and formal vocabulary from these older, more culturally distinguished media”, in the way they are described in reviews and promotion (Mittell, 2015, 2). As Jason Mittell explains, this trend of “holding on to cross-media metaphors” is usually done to describe a certain kind of pre-validated creative “aspiration”, with a view toward a text’s “legitimation” (Mittell, 2015, 2, this work is also explored in Vollans, 2015).

Though related to these issues, there is comparatively little work on the way that individual films, cultural genres, and industrial practices have been directly used as a way to market certain video games, and the experiences they claim to offer players. This article considers the promotional strategies and development history of Rockstar Games as an example of this. Overlooking their history as a developer and publisher, before focusing on three of their recent releases, it will explore how Rockstar tries to cultivate a specific identity and anticipation for their titles before they are released, via promotional paratexts accessible via their official website; and how one prominent aspect of this promotional discourse intentionally deploys references to American genre cinema and production practices. This can be read, it is here argued, as an attempt at generating a discourse of cinematic authenticity: a way of promoting that their titles both offer player interaction with pre-

established cinematic genres and conventions, and that these representations or re-mediations of cinematic history are founded upon the use of cinematic industrial techniques (Hollywood props, costumes, set locations, and “real” actors, for example) during the games’ development.

This strategy encourages potential consumers to view their titles as faithful to a kind of cinematically authenticated experience of American locales, past and present. While promoting the upcoming release of *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), Rockstar’s VP of Creative Dan Houser¹ described the critically-acclaimed series as not necessarily “about America”, but rather, “about Americana [...] the America that was sold to the world” (McKelvey, 2012). As will be shown, this assessment can be extended to all of their releases, not just the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise. But equally, this is a deliberate admission that their video games are wilful simulacra of American society and culture, informed by cultural perceptions that were questionably real in the first place. What is commodified in Rockstar’s promotional strategies, and subsequently in their titles, is an experience which feeds on, while supplying to, a presumed globalised knowledge of American culture and history, as it has already been mediated by cinema: selling “America”, past and present, in the ways in which it has already been “sold to the world”.

Rockstar Games and Cinematic Authenticity

Authenticity is a value-judgement that consistently evades definition or quantification, yet arguably it draws its power and usefulness as a commodity from specifically this: the “cultural climate of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in America has incubated [...] the rapacious insistence on authenticity—although there is little agreement as to what constitutes ‘authenticity’ at all” (Edwards, 2014, 206). As Russell Cobb notes, “[d]espite decades of postmodern critique and the digital turn of the humanities more generally, I am surrounded by the rhetoric of authenticity”. Used to sell numerous tangible or

¹ Houser is credited with writing (or co-writing) the majority of Rockstar’s titles, and is the figure who most often gives press interviews about their forthcoming or recently released titles. He remains one of the most senior executives of the company to date, having been involved in the founding of Rockstar Games in 1998 with his brother Sam Houser, Rockstar’s President.

intangible commodities, this sense of authenticity is appealing to people's desire for 'real' things (2014, 2-6).

Visual media texts have long been preoccupied with offering "realism" in terms of their narratives, characters, and world-building designs, using allusions to authenticity as marketable commodities. More pertinently, while they may not necessarily be direct remakes of, or spin-offs from preexisting texts or franchises, many video games reference the ways certain periods or events have already been mediated in visual popular culture, or otherwise employing "cinematic conventions" to foster a sense of authenticity that is inherently "selective" (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013): whether depicting conflicts like World War Two (e.g. Ramsay, 2015), or 20th century American socio-political or cultural contexts, as in recent titles like *Mafia III* (2016).²

These texts try to recreate well-known historical periods, while referencing previously mediated representations, already more than one step removed from their real foundations; that is, in Walter Benjamin's words, "[a text's] unique existence in the place where it is at this moment" (2008, 5). But Linda Hutcheon especially—while acknowledging the influence of particularly Baudrillard's conception of simulacra—points to the reductiveness of these theoretical frameworks, and the "naivety of [the] view of the innocent and stable representation once possible": (2002, 31-32). As she summarises, in postmodern culture

gone is the Benjaminian "aura" with its notions of originality, authenticity, and uniqueness, and with these go all the taboos against strategies that rely on the parody and appropriation of already existing representations. In other words, *the history of representation itself can become a valid subject of art* (2002, 33, my emphasis).

Art can represent what Vera Dika has elsewhere referred to as "a picture of a past movie memory" (2012, 209).

² *Mafia III's* promotional strategy similarly linked actual historical events to cinema history and 1960s popular culture touchstones (particular popular music) to promote the title's release. See for example Skipper, 2016.

Thus, in marketing terms, a text's recognisable relationship to previous media(tions) arguably only increases its potential value as commodity. As Jonathan Stubbs has illustrated with regard to the historical film, these sorts of visual media texts "tend to be built from the details up", in an attempt to "overwhelm viewers with material evidence evoking the past" (2013, 58). As he continues therefore, while "a surfeit of realistic visual detail does not in itself recreate the past", it is rather the case that "the ability of certain iconographies to evoke given periods may be a function of their *familiarity to contemporary audiences* rather than their authenticity" (2013, 58, my emphasis).

Ryan Lizardi has argued that in spite of the concerns other "philosophers of history and critical theorists" (Lizardi, 2015, 2), "the norm" that contemporary mass media offers consumers is "a narcissistic and idealized version of nostalgia" (Lizardi, 2015, 4). This individualised "playlist" version of the past "defin[ed] [...] through media texts" (2015, 39) is "at odds with centuries of discourse about the importance of maintaining a relationship to a shared cultural past that is critical" (2015, 34). Moreover, Lizardi sees Rockstar's titles (*Grand Theft Auto* and *Red Dead Redemption* [2010] especially) as implicated in this, in that under their narrative surface, these franchises are made of and utilise the same formal components; making the latter resemble a sequel to the former. In essence he argues this leads to the oversimplification of history from a "presentist" perspective (2015, 107-112).³

Very much at odds then, Rockstar has long sought to establish their image as a company that makes inherently cinematic video games, partly by building upon "past movie" (Dika, 2012, 209) or cultural memories— and these are made explicitly manifest well beyond the textual components of their games. Both Rockstar's brand and marketing strategy actively promotes a kind of interactive experience constructed largely through references to the mediation of America's past and present in wider (predominantly audio-visual) culture, in addition to borrowing ludological components from previous titles. They view all of their games as

³ The intention here is not to disagree with Lizardi's analysis, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address Rockstar's claims of representing cinema and history. What I argue here is that by accounting for Rockstar's promotional strategies, we can develop more nuanced understandings of these titles, rather than reading *Red Dead Redemption*, as simply 'a new [*Grand Theft Auto*] game costumed in a historical skin' (Lizardi, 2015, 108).

having been “incredibly cinematic experiences”, claiming that they have consciously tried to – in the words of VP of Product Development Jeronimo Barrera — “[blur] the lines” between video games and film (Cowen, 2011). Even the most cursory search for articles on, or reviews of their titles will find repeated reference to their cinematic aesthetic, experience, or intertextuality; some go so far as to offer “cinematic primers” for playing specific Rockstar games (Kotaku, 2016; Lambrechts, 2010).

Rockstar have thus tried to engineer their public image as that of a company committed to proving the cultural status of video games, relative to cinema’s prestige. In Dan Houser’s words:

Rockstar was founded with the mission statement that video games were the next mass-market entertainment medium, that they were uniquely interesting and powerful, and that we as a company would serve two masters to prove this fact: combining the production values of movies, with an obsession with gameplay, above all else (“Rockstar Games awarded Academy Fellowship”, 2014).

While video games are presented here as “unique” in their power, it is from cinema, and cinema-industrial, history that Rockstar claims here to draw their inspiration—and indeed, cultural legitimation—for creating texts that combine the essence of movies with the possibility for player interaction and enjoyment.

Unsurprisingly therefore, Rockstar’s output as a studio almost exclusively consists of games which depict or reference iconic moments or specific examples of American cinema. In this sense, references to cinema history have always played an important role in both developing and promoting their titles. The most direct point of convergence between American cinema history and Rockstar appeared in 2005, in their only licensed video game adaptation of a preexisting film: *The Warriors* (dir. Walter Hill, 1979), using much of the original cast and soundtrack.⁴ The game was remastered and re-released digitally in July 2016, and critically it has been considered “a great exemplar of film-licensed games done right, spending much of

⁴ The website is still available, with illustrations vividly reminiscent of the film itself, in an artistic style that is used for other Rockstar titles. For a study of the divergences of thematic elements and content between the film in the late-1970s, and the video game in the mid-2000s, see Anable, 2013.

its time showing the events preceding the cult gang-fight movie it was based on, rather than trying to adapt the already-told story into a game framework, nor ignoring it totally” (Skrebels, 2016).

The rest of their portfolio, though not explicitly remakes, can be considered in terms of how they interact with or reshape other notable cinematic genres or specific films. The series most synonymous with Rockstar and their development as a company is *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-, hereafter *GTA*). Though not overly-successful until the release of *GTA: III* (2001)—which has been critically perceived as a “paradigm shift” and “medium defining” (Taylor, 2006, 115)—, the later games in the franchise appear as conscious attempts to mediate the “spirit or soul” (Whalen, 2006, 145) of particular American spaces. For example, as Ian Bogost and Dan Klainbaum argue in their examinations of *GTA: Vice City* (2002) and *GTA: San Andreas* (2004), these virtual game worlds are “not re-creations of real urban locales, but rather remixed, hybridised cities fashioned from popular culture’s notions of real American cities” (2006, 162). Thereby, *Vice City* “is more representative of the 1980s television cop drama *Miami Vice* than of the city of Miami”, and similarly *San Andreas* “is more representative of the 1990s film *Boyz in the Hood* than of the city of Los Angeles” (2006, 162). Indeed, the same assessment could be made for the two more recent franchise installments, *GTA IV* (2008) and *GTA V* (2013), which have taken 2000s popular cultural notions (as well as contemporary socio-political circumstances) and translated them respectively into the virtual, explorable spaces of Liberty (New York) City, and Los Santos, another attempt at Los Angeles approximation.

The experience of these virtual cities that the games offer (and the characters and narratives found within them) is inspired by and indebted to popular culture, most notably cinema; “By leveraging these popular notions of existing spatial conventions, Rockstar created an amalgam of real and mediated places resulting in hybrid virtual cities whose cultural rules prove more salient than their physical geography” (Bogost and Klainbaum, 2006, 162). The result through these games, they argue, is both “a critique as well as affirmation of the influence of media on people in the developed world” (2006, 175). Moreover, they further contest that “[i]n our increasingly mediated society, what is perceived as real and what is mediated are notions that are becoming blurred” (2006, 175). Something that is heavily

mediated might therefore be accepted as authentic of a particular place and time; whereby “Americana”, not America, becomes currency.

Rockstar’s other titles follow this same pattern of inspirations and influences; offering interactive experiences through the lens of the cinematic. In 2003, the first game in the *Manhunt* series was released, hounded by controversy over the depictions of graphic violence and murder that the player is forced throughout the game’s narrative to commit (see for example Millward, 2004; Cundy, 2007). While *Manhunt* preceded the first installment of the *Saw* (dir. James Wan, 2004) franchise, it similarly explores enforced violence orchestrated by an unseen controlling figure. As with a number of their titles that were released for PlayStation1/2, *Manhunt* has also been recently re-released digitally onto the PlayStation store, and recently described by *Wired* as not “a fun killing game”, but a horror game that supposedly “remains a jarring reflection on violence”, particularly in the way that it is so heavily mediated (Muncy, 2016).

Bully (2005, also known as *Canis Canem Edit*) allows players to explore a boarding school set in a fictionalised version of New England, and the immediate suburban and urban landscapes around it. Players control the Holden Caulfield-like protagonist Jimmy Hopkins as he progresses from new kid at Bullworth Academy, rising the ranks among the school’s notable factions vying for control and respect, often via schoolyard violence. Again, while arguably an homage to idealised, cliché images of the American school system, like the titles in the *GTA* series, *Bully* tries to encapsulate a kind of zeitgeist approach to a specific period in one’s own life—or, more pertinently, to the life of an American teenager, as it has been represented in popular culture. As such its narrative, characters and many environmental details pay explicit or implicit reference to a number of notable American films like *Rebel Without a Cause* (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955), *Rocky* (dir. Sylvester Stalone, 1976), *The Karate Kid* (dir. John G. Avildsen, 1984), and *Back to the Future* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1985); television series such as *Star Trek*; and wider cultural references drawn from literature, comic books, and other games (Rockstar’s included). The borrowing of cultural imagery and tropes thus creates a product that appears at once both newly invented, and yet laden with preexisting cultural references, recognisable enough that they have been identified and collated by players online (see “Bully Trivia” [ND]).

In terms of titles that are explicit attempts to interact with cinematic genres, *Max Payne*⁵ (2001-2012) is a contemporaneously-set neo-noir series that combines *noir* conventions with the influence of Hong Kong action cinema, especially the work of director John Woo. The series follows the titular character, a former New York City cop turned fugitive, framed for murder. The most recent installment, *Max Payne 3* (2012) was promoted as offering a “highly detailed, cinematic experience from Rockstar Games” (“Information” ND). Indeed, the franchise incorporates filmic visual effects as part of the gameplay experience, specifically the trademarked “Bullet Time” technology (Sudmann, 2016). Again, these kinds of medium convergences are interesting: as with *Manhunt* preceding *Saw*, the first *Max Payne* (2001) was already in development before *The Matrix* (dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) was released, which was the first film to use this kind of visual effect. This style of gameplay mechanic has subsequently become a key feature of Rockstar’s *Red Dead* (2004-) series (there known as “Dead Eye”), and a version of it can be performed as a special ability by Michael De Santa, one of *GTA V*’s playable protagonists.

Other Rockstar titles explicitly indebted to popular conceptions of cultural and cinematic genres are the *Red Dead* series and *L.A. Noire* (2011). *Red Dead Revolver* (2004) and *Red Dead Redemption* are conscious attempts at adapting the western cinematic genre into video games.⁶ *Revolver* is an arcade-style shooter, pitting players against waves of archetypically “western” enemies and bosses in a comparatively linear game structure. It appears heavily inspired by Spaghetti Westerns, not least for its score, which is drawn entirely from Italian Westerns and features tracks composed by Ennio Morricone, Luis Bacalov, Bruno Nicolai, and Francesco de Masi. Moreover, its bounty-hunter protagonist Red Harlow appears as another incarnation of Clint Eastwood’s Man with No Name from Sergio Leone’s *Dollars* trilogy (1964-1966). On the other hand, *Red Dead Redemption* is far more expansive and complex in its presentation of a fictionalised southwestern, Mexican-borderland frontier, not least because of its open-world game style, and overarching narrative presented as an elegy to

⁵ The *Max Payne* series was originally developed by Remedy Entertainment, with the first title created and published independently of Rockstar. The second game in the series, while still developed by Remedy, was published by Rockstar in 2003. The franchise was acquired and a new addition to the franchise was subsequently produced and released by Rockstar after 2012.

⁶ For an overview of the western genre in video games, see for example Wills, 2008; Buel, 2013.

the death of the Old West, in which players progress the story of former outlaw John Marston, as he tracks down former associates for the government.

Unlike *Max Payne*'s contemporary setting, *L.A. Noire*'s narrative centres around Cole Phelps, a World War Two veteran turned LAPD cop. Taking place in 1947 Los Angeles, it is thus spatially and historically contextualised within what has retrospectively been deemed the "classic *film noir*" period of Hollywood studio output. Specifically-developed MotionScan technology was used to capture the intricacies of actors' performances and relay them in-game, as well as "Hardcore Archival Research" (Madrigal, 2011; Masters, 2011) to create an "extremely faithful reconstruction" of this late-40s cityscape for player exploration ("Behind the Scenes of *L.A. Noire*'s Painstaking Production Design", 2011).

Released in three consecutive years, *Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Max Payne 3* take on two of the most significant and critically-popular genres in American cinematic history, with the expressed intentions of making video games that feel like "classic" entries into these respective generic canons, despite being of a different medium:

we spent a long time being told Westerns were dead, then we made *Red Dead Redemption*, which along with *True Grit* [2010] showed that well-made classic Westerns have life left in them in any medium. The same could be said of classic Noir - a great film could be successful now, just as *Chinatown* and *LA Confidential* were long after the 1940s (Dan Houser in Gaudiosi, 2011)

Furthermore, the expected player experience that Rockstar foregrounded in the promotion of these titles is predicated on players wanting to enact what, for example, action cinema heroes do on screen:

the experience of playing any *Max Payne* game...is meant to take that passively vicarious thrill of seeing [in films] a cool and unflappable hero dispense justice and revenge – and turn it into an adrenaline-pumping first-hand sensation of action ('Rockstar Recommends: A Chronology of Favorite Movie Shootouts and Standoffs', 2012)

As Dan Houser also stated in an interview given around the time of *L.A. Noire*'s release, "[w]ith both Westerns and Noir, we have really enjoyed bringing an interactive element to what was previously merely a literary and cinematic tradition" (in Gaudiosi, 2011).

Just as in outlining Rockstar's "mission statement"—the combination of cinematic practices and achievements with gameplay—Houser also here deliberately attempts to evoke the idea that playing their western or *noir* games builds upon previous enjoyment of, while offering something *more* ("first-hand") than "merely" reading or watching a western or *noir* book or film. Though in many ways this problematically assumes (or rather, tries to suggest) that watching films or television, or reading books are simply "passive" experiences relative to playing a game, this discourse is key to Rockstar's marketing strategy. It is suggested that the ideal audience for Rockstar's games is one who has at least some preexisting knowledge of this cinematic history, and thus wants to "[assume] a more active role" (Murray, 1997, 38) in experiencing aspects of it themselves.

Choosing *noir* and westerns as subject matter is arguably a particularly shrewd way of ensuring this to be the case. According to James Naremore, *noir* is a "world-wide mass memory; a dream image of bygone glamour, it represses as much history as it recalls, usually in the service of cinephilia and commodification" (1998, 39). Similarly, Michael Coyne notes that "As the quintessentially American melodrama, the Western's lure has been phenomenal" (1998, 2). Yet as mentioned, what makes Rockstar a particularly useful example of the explicit capitalisation on these heavily-visually-mediated periods, is the extent to which the cinematic foundations of their titles are not only embedded in the games themselves, but are also used to support a marketing discourse that accompanied the release of these most cinematically inspired and aspiring titles: trying to appeal to a wider audience than just those who share the Rockstar's creative executives' "long-standing love of American culture" (Dan Houser in Gaudiosi, 2011).

“Rockstar Recommends”: Promoting Cinematic Authenticity

Jonathan Gray notes that paratextual —that is, content related to a text but “outside” of it— promotional material functions as a way of generating “hype” around a text before its release. This hype, engineered by the industry, “aims to be the first word on any text, so that it creates excitement” (2008, 33-34). Observing that it is unlikely an audience’s perception “begin[s] when the first scene of a film or program begins” (2010, 26), Gray contends that promotional materials provided to audiences before or outside of their consumption of media products inevitably “shape the reading strategies that we will take with us ‘into’ the text, and [...] provide the all-important early frames through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption”, whether the audience eventually “resists” these meanings or not (2010, 26). With the amount of time and money studios plough into advertising their forthcoming products, we should expect that there is “nothing random or accidental about the meanings on offer in Hollywood’s trailers, posters, previews, and ad campaigns” (Gray 2010, 47-48). They “promis[e] value” which can be attained by consumers who choose a specific product and “buy into” the hype (Gray, 2008, 36).

Rockstar’s budgets for their projects are speculated to be in excess of between fifty and one-hundred million dollars.⁷ Presumably therefore, their promotional strategy is strictly coordinated to ensure that the correct image of what that game will offer, and should be perceived as, is cultivated. Rather than simply allowing players to engage with these products and identify specific cultural references and influences themselves, for *Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Max Payne 3*, Rockstar curated a wider field of paratextual promotional content, ultimately generating what Barbara Klinger terms a “consumable identity” (1989, 5; 9) for these games intended to shape a player’s subsequent reception of them. As Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson note, marketing of media products has profoundly changed in recent years: with regard to television specifically: “the goal [...] is no longer simply to persuade people to watch programmes on broadcast channels but to navigate audiences in

⁷ The reported expenditure on several of Rockstar’s biggest titles is as follows: *L.A. Noire* was reported to have cost around \$50million to develop (Geoghegan, 2011); *Red Dead Redemption* at ‘between 80 and 100 million’ (Schiesel, 2010). *Max Payne 3*, *GTA V* and *GTA IV* are included in a recent *Gamepot* feature on the most expensive games of all time: *Max Payne 3* cost around \$105million, *GTA V* reportedly cost \$265million, *GTA IV* around \$100million (Cartelli, 2015).

rich visual environments, and to “connect viewers to content” in a burgeoning multiplatform world” (2015, 2).

As Henry Jenkins suggests, convergence is not only “a technological process” but also “represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (2006, 3).

As seen above, like many video game developers Rockstar’s marketing involves senior figures in the company giving comparatively rare, exclusive interviews to the press. Additionally, more direct company-to-fan communication continues to take place via regular blog posts on the *Newswire* section of the official Rockstar website. Two interrelated but separate thematic strands of the cinematic promotional strategy for *Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Max Payne 3* were deployed in these blog posts. Firstly, to create a particularised version of the wider cultural genre the games were seen to be part of, a number of blogs were published in which “Rockstar Recommends” certain films that could be watched before playing them. This content was explicitly framed as useful for assisting potential players to get “in the mood” to experience the games upon release (“Rockstar Recommends: ‘The Wild Bunch’ ”), but can also be seen to serve as a foundational means of cinematic authentication of the experiences they offer. Secondly, and most pervasive in the promotion of *L.A. Noire*, blog posts and promotional features drew attention to the game’s development and production, foregrounding aspects which were inherently like that of, or borrowed from, cinematic industrial practices.

Combined, this range of Rockstar-authored paratexts contribute to this discourse of cinematic authenticity, as it was created and hyped in the company’s promotional cycle, beginning roughly a year before the titles were brought to market. A productive way of conceptualising these materials is to view them in relation to what Mittell terms “orienting paratexts”. As he outlines, the internet works as a “highly accessible paratextual realm” to which “creators can outsource backstory and cultural references [...] paratextual resources designed specifically to help orient viewers” (2015, 262) - or here, players. Highlighting certain elements of these games’ production and subsequent textual representations of conventions established in genre cinema, before consumers even have a chance to play them, attempts to code as authentic

both the numerous intertextual references to significant examples of films, and the use of established actors, props, locations or costumes. They encourage player recognition of these elements as something of value, commodifying the ways in which Rockstar have borrowed from cinema, arguably with the intention to “pry open the insularity of the text as object and to disperse it into an assortment of capitalizable elements” (Klinger, 1989, 13-14).

In Klinger’s words, “[t]he goal of promotion is to produce multiple avenues of access to the text that will make [it] resonate as extensively as possible...in order to maximise its audience” (1989, 10). Attempting to entice consumers by deploying carefully selected references to genre cinema and film history, curating them into a defined promotional discourse, creates a particular promotional version of the wider cinematic canon. It provides a jumping-off point for potential players with or without knowledge of the wider cinematic genres they speak to, informing them of how the experience the game offers relates to and builds on a cinematic experience. As Gray puts it, “[a]s media scholars have long noted, much of the media’s powers come not necessarily from being able to tell us what to think, but what to think about, and how to think about it” (Gray, 2010, 3).

That is, Rockstar here create their own “discursive cluster” (Mittell, 2001, 11) consisting of cinematic (or wider cultural) content that appears to authenticate the choice of gameplay actions, narrative themes, playable or non-playable characters, or other seemingly cinematic elements which are incorporated in their titles. By no means representative of the varieties of the corpus of possible films that could (and have) been described as “western” or “noir”, in the multitude of problematic or exclusive generic definitions and canons that have been created in film criticism, these “clusters” intentionally privilege what Rockstar view as classic examples from the respective genres the games speak to; those which seemingly hold the origin point of specific elements which “reappear”⁸ in the games themselves, adapted from their authentic cinematic roots.

⁸ The ‘reappearance, in another discursive field, of an element (a plot, a theme, a character, etc.) that has previously appeared elsewhere’, is defined by Francesco Casetti, with regards to ways of conceptualising adaptation, as ‘a new discursive event that locates itself in a certain time and space in society, one that, at the same time, carries within itself the memory of an earlier discursive event’. See Casetti, 2004, 82 (emphasis in original text).

Max Payne 3 had four “Rockstar Recommends” blogs. One pointed fans in the direction of John Woo’s *The Killer* (1989) as a ‘touchstone’ to the “more international” influences on the franchise; offering an insight into “the canon of over-the-top Hong Kong shoot-em-ups”, in addition to the “NYC-set detective films” which are most often read as key to its “heritage” (“Rockstar Recommends: ‘The Killer’ ”, 2012). Another offered up *Point Blank* (dir. John Boorman, 1967) as a film with “a great many stylistic parallels” to the series, as well as “a treat for Max fans who can appreciate a surreal take on the crime-action genre” (“Rockstar Recommends: ‘Point Blank’ ”, 2012). A third highlighted Rio-set crime movie *Elite Squad* (*Tropa de Elite*, dir. José Padilha, 2007), which influenced the choice of São Paulo as setting. This film is also used to explain elements of the game’s narrative context, which focuses on “the social issues stemming from the disparity of wealth [that] persist in both of Brazil’s major cities” (“Rockstar Recommends: ‘Elite Squad [Tropa de Elite]’ ”, 2011). The fourth and final “Recommends” blog compiled “a history of some of our favorite sequences of rugged shootouts and intense standoffs as well as movies in general with scenes of exception gunplay”, the intention of which was to give prospective players “a pretty good sense of how we’re aiming to take inspiration from these sorts of classic shootouts and faceoffs into an epic videogame experience” (“Rockstar Recommends: A Chronology of Favorite Movie Shootouts and Standoffs”, 2012). What Rockstar see as prime examples of established popular film genres (like Hong Kong, or otherwise “action” cinema) are here deployed as a marker for authentic cinematic action that players could perform and enact in the game itself; because the in-game action or narrative is seen to mimic or simulate the action or narrative contained within these films, as intentionally selected examples that showcase this action. Moreover, films with certain thematic or narrative elements are used to provide access points to number of historic and socio-political issues and themes included in the game itself. What is marketed is player experience within a world that is familiar, can be supported as authentic by players’ access to/of cinema, while also retaining its appeal to “Max fans” already acquainted with the franchise’s own history, and Rockstar as a brand that promises cinematic action.

This attempt at fostering cinematic authenticity is even more developed in the promotion of *Red Dead Redemption*. As technical director Ted Carson claimed in a promotional interview with *gamespot*, Rockstar wanted to give players the ability to interact with and enact ‘as

many classic western situations as [Rockstar] could think of', to offer the "complete western experience interactively" (Gamespot Staff, 2010). One review of *Red Dead Redemption* upon release explicitly praised that:

Rockstar has not only delivered a kick-ass take on the Wild West era but they've done it with a finesse that satisfies every need of anyone who has ever fantasised about being a cowboy. Unless of course, your visions are based solely on *Brokeback Mountain*, in which case you may be disappointed (Irvine, 2010)⁹

This latter point—about the game being more of a 'kick-ass'-style than "*Brokeback Mountain*"-style western—is particularly noteworthy here. The claims of cinematic authenticity that were outsourced to *Red Dead Redemption*'s promotional paratexts made plain that there was a certain kind of experience of "the West" that it would offer players (and indeed, non-heteronormativity had little to do with it). To suggest that the game would live up to the hype of being the "complete western experience", the individual "Rockstar Recommends" blog posts that appeared within this promotional cycle created a particular generic discourse in which only exclusive western themes or conventions were the chief currency. Designed for those who wanted to "[get] into the spirit of the game before its release" ("A Rockstar Recommends Recap", 2010), these blog posts curated a number of key texts intended to assist fans in doing so, subsequently reordering the long, complex history of the western genre into a specific consumable canon that supported the game's interpretation and ensuing representation of cinematic history.

Thus, to cinematically authenticate *Red Dead Redemption*'s narrative arc, fictional-yet-historicised location, gameplay options and playable-protagonist John Marston, chosen were films that appear to be representative of, for example, the brutality or cynicism of the final days of "the West", the transition toward law, order and "civilisation", and the subsequent death of a particular type of westerner. Primacy was given to the work of Sam Peckinpah, especially *The Wild Bunch* (dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1969) as a film that "may well be the

⁹ This sort of authentic/correct and inauthentic/incorrect binary of valuing western films or accessing the genre canon is also evident in the Rockstar-authored paratexts, where one of the final *Newswire* posts suggested that readers should 'feel free to leave us a note of your personal faves that we didn't include... but note that anyone suggesting "Wild, Wild West" will have their comment removed for abusive behavior.' See 'A Rockstar Recommends Recap', 2010.

greatest western of them all” (“Rockstar Recommends: ‘The Wild Bunch’ ”), as well as having an “amazing tone” that Rockstar had aspired to (Onyett, 2009). This cluster also featured reference to genre icon John Wayne’s final western, *The Shootist* (dir. Don Siegel, 1976), a denouement for legendary, professional westerners; *Once Upon a Time in the West* (dir. Sergio Leone, 1968), an elegy to the closing of the frontier; the importance of Eastwood’s post-Leone, hyperviolent, hypermasculine directorial work in *High Plains Drifter* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 1973) and *Unforgiven* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 1992); and ‘buddy’ films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (dir. George Roy Hill, 1969).

Many of the descriptions that accompanied these recommendations in the blog posts emphasised their relevant themes, and/or how they were relevant to the development of the western genre in cinema more broadly; and moreover, how these developments had inspired Rockstar in creating the experience that and the player could eventually have via *Red Dead Redemption*. For example, in the case of *Butch Cassidy*, that it had “invented the buddy film” and was “an incredible homage to a dying breed of outlaws” (“Rockstar Recommends: ‘Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid’ ”, 2009). Likewise, summarising *Unforgiven*, the post noted that it was “a fantastic mediation on the possibility of salvation” (or, *Redemption*), “and the illusions people have about both the West and themselves” (“Rockstar Recommends: ‘Unforgiven’ ”, 2010).

As discussed elsewhere, these “recommendations” belong to a very specific view of the western cinematic genre canon. This view privileges a distinctly white-male experience of Western American history and agency as its terms of purchase (Wright 2016 & 2017; see also Smyth, 2014 for exploration of western “genre cleansing”), because this is exactly the kind of gameplay experience that *Red Dead Redemption* offers. Fulfilling the “complete” western experience is thus predicated on the presentation of western cinematic authenticity as being certain things: “orienting” the potential player’s expectation for a game that fulfilled a particular perception of what makes a classic western genre staple, or the right kind of cultural text to consume to prepare players for the game.

The same strategy of curating a particular kind of “generic cluster” (Mittell, 2001) is apparent in the promotional cycle for *L.A. Noire*. In the game’s “Rockstar Recommends” posts, also

constructed was the (inherently problematic¹⁰) idea that a defined arc could be traced from the original “*film noirs*” of 1940s-50s Hollywood, through the first wave of neo-noirs from *Chinatown* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974) in the 1970s, to more recent examples like *L.A. Confidential* (dir. Curtis Hanson, 1997) and *The Usual Suspects* (dir. Bryan Singer, 1995). These references were similarly marshalled into a consumable canon according to how their thematic elements correlated to the gameplay or narrative experience that *L.A. Noire* offered players: whether in terms of tragic, “good-hearted” male leads and their “gut-wrenching” conclusions of their story (for example, “Rockstar Recommends: ‘Detour’ ”, 2011; “Rockstar Recommends: ‘Scarlet Street’ ”, 2011), or procedural masculinity and the male investigatory narrative that *L.A. Noire*’s style of gameplay mimicked (for example “Rockstar Recommends: ‘He Walked by Night’ ”). Moreover, two of the films featured in the “Recommends” blogs were almost entirely remade (*The Naked City* [dir. Jules Dassin, 1948]), or overtly referenced (*Reefer Madness* [dir. Louis J. Gasnier, 1936]) in individual cases which became downloadable content for the game. Thus, Rockstar promoted these blogs, and the selection of many of their “personal favorites”, as a means of “helping [potential players] get primed for the experience” of the game upon release (“Rockstar Recommends: ‘Detour’ ”, 2011). As the copyright for a number of these films has lapsed, they could be accessed online (via archive.org)—directly fostering the linkage of content across platforms, gathering paratextual materials that preexisted the game into its own “consumable identity” (Klinger, 1989), via the internet.

As can be seen, Rockstar specifically provokes and encourages cinephilia, choosing films that support the experience their games offer, using them as a kind of cinematic legitimization; subsuming into the games’ relative canonical position a number of reference points which are intended to confer cinematic authenticity and value on the games themselves. There is

¹⁰ The idea that *film noir* is a neatly-definable genre is perhaps one of the most contentious notions in film criticism and historiography: as summarised by Marc Vernet, ‘As an object or corpus of films, *film noir* does not belong to the history of cinema; it belongs as a notion to the history of film criticism, or, if one prefers, to the history of those who wanted to love American cinema...and to form an image of it. *Film noir* is a collector’s idea that, for the moment, can only be found in books’ (1993, 26). Yet the fact that Rockstar capitalise on the inherent discursiveness of the way *film noir* has come to be retrospectively, popularly viewed as a genre, with certain accepted films consisting its canon, is unsurprising; and indeed, works to commodify the fact that what they are offering can be read as authentically *noir* because it hits all the right filmic touchstones, and is set in the ‘classic’ *film noir* period.

another layer to this attempt at promoting authenticity, below the virtual surface: the “cinematic” nature of their games’ production.

L.A. Noire and cinematic production

At the time of its release, *L.A. Noire* was heralded as a new benchmark in terms of cinematic and video game convergence. The title became the first video game included in 2011 Tribeca Film Festival’s Official Selection: an internationally-recognised marker of legitimisation within the film community, hyping the game via identifiably prestigious, authentically cinematic standards. Speaking to *The Hollywood Reporter* at the time, and pressed to comment on “the convergence of Hollywood and games”, Dan Houser stressed that

There isn’t much production convergence. The process and form are too different – one is a linear, two hour experience that is fully curated and managed by the director, while the other is a 30-hour plus interactive experience in which the player has far more control over what they see, so the environment has to be transformed from a set into a fully realized world. That being said, there will be increasing talent convergence as games continue to become a more interesting creative medium that requires a greater number and variety of Hollywood talent. Actors, writers, directors, make-up artists, production designers, musicians, sound engineers will all work in games alongside movies and television (Gaudiosi, 2011)

Despite Houser’s apparent unease here at throwing *L.A. Noire* headlong into the debate over media convergence, and his attempt at preserving a particular level of medium specificity, this marketing strategy specifically foregrounded the ways in which its production *was* inherently like that of a Hollywood film.

To begin with, from the earliest discussions of *L.A. Noire* in the press, the new technologies that were created in the development process were heavily publicised. Particularly foregrounded was MotionScan technology designed to capture the intricacies of the actors’ performances. Many news items ran with the idea that the game “conquered” or “defeated the uncanny valley” (Broughall 2010; Bramwell, 2010). Some declared this technology the “next

step forward” in motion capture, as previously used for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001-2003) and *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009), ultimately asking “Will *L.A. Noire* change the game for actors?” who might now view the medium as an outlet that could showcase ‘legitimate acting’ (Geoghegan, 2011). Even this technology itself, therefore, was promoted in conjunction with ideas about how it could best serve both *L.A. Noire* and the medium in becoming more cinematic; or at least, absorbing the talent (and thus prestige status) of cinema.

Moreover, this technology was again promoted as offering the experience of interacting with something that television or film had offered consumers the ability to watch: this time, interrogating suspects and witnesses. The actors were “directed” to mimic not real-life interrogations or the range of human emotions a real detective might encounter, but rather, to emulate the sort of “performance [...] people are used to seeing on film or on TV, when you watch liars on a cop show” (Stuart, 2011b). Thus, the wider point of this technology was, according to *L.A. Noire*’s writer and director Brendan McNamara—the former head of Team Bondi, who co-developed the game—to create a game experience which “was wrapped up in those interrogation scenes that you get in TV shows or film, when the audience is able to read people’s faces [...] and see whether they believe them, or sympathise” (Cowen, 2011). Elsewhere, McNamara claimed: “I think we’re starting to blur the lines between a television program and a video game” (Broughall, 2010). Indeed, it was hoped to have been, as described by Jeronimo Barrera, the start of a new “genre” of games (Cowen, 2011) that would do just that.¹¹ While again not wishing to diminish (nor overview) the problematic nature of this evident reduction of media consumption to an active/passive dichotomy here, a more immediate point remains. By promoting the use of an inherently cinematic technology as new to *L.A. Noire*, and thus that it offered something new and valuable to players, what is commodified is an authentic experience enabled by the adoption of cinematic production practice in the creation of a video game. This discourse was also a staple of *L.A. Noire*’s Rockstar-authored paratexts, in *Newswire* posts under the heading “Painstaking Production Design”.

¹¹ This interview was featured on Rockstar’s *Newswire*, under the heading “Creating a New Genre of Videogames”, indicating that this particular part of the promotional discourse surrounding *L.A. Noire*’s was one they wanted to emphasise. See ““Creating a New Genre of Video Games”, 2011.

All featuring quotations from Team Bondi’s Production Designer Simon Wood—as an authoritative representative of the research team—, three separate posts used cinematic-industrial vocabulary to describe the game’s research and production process. These posts directly solicited recognition of cinematic authenticity that even underpinned the game’s development, claiming to

offer just a few glimpses of the detailed wardrobe and set research that went into the production design of this very unique game – often the last step for most major motion pictures before principal photography, these were among the earliest steps taken towards creating L.A. Noire’s realistically authentic digital world of 1947 Los Angeles (‘Behind the Scenes of L.A. Noire’s Painstaking Production Design: Part One’, 2011)

Firstly, the blog dedicated to the research that went into building authentic “locations and set design” highlighted that ‘the run down apartment building’ players would visit and investigate during one of the many solvable cases, was “an almost perfect replica of the Barclay Hotel in L.A. which has been used as a location in many Hollywood films” (“Behind the Scenes”, 2011), blending this location’s real-world *and* cinematic recognisability. Secondly, the fact that they had “hired almost every conceivable vintage prop from the biggest Hollywood prop houses in the business” (“Behind the Scenes”, 2011) was meant to confer (period and cinematic-industrial) authenticity on the many items players could interact with at crime scenes during gameplay. Finally, legitimation is even encoded onto the “completely authentic to the period” clothing characters wore in-game, which had been supplied by Los Angeles-based Western Costume and digitally incorporated into the game. Explicit notation was made of the fact that Western Costume had previously dressed neo-noirs *L.A. Confidential* and *Chinatown*, as well as other prestige film-historical titles like *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *Gone with the Wind* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939) (“Behind the Scenes”, 2011).

The recognisability of actors who played the (400 or so) characters in *L.A. Noire*’s narrative were also used as a means of marketing cinematic authenticity. A series of blogs entitled “Where have I seen that face?” highlighted some of the non-video game roles that they had

been credited with. Particular emphasis was made on the fact that a large number of the cast had appeared on another celebrated, equally promoted-as-“cinematic” period television series which was critically popular at the time. Aaron Staton, who motion-captured and voiced *L.A. Noire*’s protagonist Cole Phelps, was known at the time for playing Ken Cosgrove on *Mad Men* (2007-2015).¹² The posts also made special note of when one of the actors who played minor characters in *L.A. Noire* had appeared on the show— emphasising that “fans of *Mad Men* are sure to recognize many faces beyond...Staton” (“Where’ve I Seen that Face?”, 2011). This blog series therefore capitalises specifically on not only the postmodernly-referential nature of visual media, but also on the fact that these “serious” actors lent credibility and authenticity to the game, having developed their acting talent in more traditional visual media titles; another promotional strategy deployed to “blur the lines” between these media, and legitimate the latter against the industrial conventions of the former.

Unlike their “recommendations”, these blog posts offer players little content-wise aside from reading about the “painstaking” labour of the game’s development. Yet they form part of the wider promotional discourse around the release of these video games which foregrounds that their production has some of the same industrial qualities as film production. Repeated references to production design or the use of established actors and “gamechanging” technology as markers of production quality or value, promotes the appeal of their titles as offering players the possibility to experience something inherently cinematic.

Conclusions: Grand Theft Auto V and (Cinematic) Gameplay as Promotion

When *GTA V* was released, one of the many new features of this instalment of the franchise was its Director Mode; an aspect of the Rockstar Editor which was initially enabled on PC versions of the game but later came to PlayStation4 and XboxOne consoles in 2015. Whether they make personal use of it or not, Director Mode is an aspect of *GTA V* that players are introduced to while progressing the game’s narrative structure, and would frequently see reference to if they followed Rockstar’s official social media accounts. It allows players to

¹² In more than one interview Brendan McNamara noted that it was Dan Houser’s idea to actually cast Staton as Cole Phelps precisely because he had seen him on *Mad Men*. See for example Stuart, 2011a. Thus as Jedd Hakimi notes, this might be read as ‘a production decision that perhaps aims to tap into a contemporary sense of the American mid-century by borrowing associations from other texts’ (Hakimi, 2016, 8 footnote 21).

“stage creative moviemaking sequences from a cast of characters ranging from familiar faces from Story Mode, to pedestrians and even animals”, which could be recorded and shared to other players via YouTube and the Rockstar Social Club (“Introducing the Rockstar Editor”, 2015). What had previously only been possible (and had been created) by modding PC versions of preceding games was now an inbuilt feature of the game itself. Players were encouraged to use and share their creations online, while Rockstar ran various competitions through social media and *Newswire* to solicit player-“directed” footage.¹³ Many of these are original creations that players imagined for themselves by using *GTA V*’s world and characters,¹⁴ often collated by Rockstar and featured in *Newswire* posts showcasing ‘video creators hard at work harnessing footage worthy of the silver screen via the Rockstar Editor’ (“Rockstar Editor Fan Vids”, 2015). However, players also actively tried to recreate instances from existing films and television series. Diverse examples ranged from recreations of specific stunts that were featured the *Fast and Furious* franchise (2001-) (McElroy, 2015) and *The A Team* (8-BIT BASTARD, 2015), “iconic scenes” from *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971) (GTA Series Videos, 2016), “80s classic” *Magnum P.I.* (btz, 2015), as well as creating tributes to other Rockstar games, notably *GTA: Vice City* and *Red Dead Redemption* (“Rockstar Editor Fan Vids”, 2015). Moreover, in addition to some of these creations being relayed to fans via the *Newswire*, many featured in articles published by various entertainment news websites (see for example Kerr, 2015).

This feature adds to the promotional discourse of cinematic authenticity around Rockstar’s previous games, not only by giving more content to consume, but also to create. The game itself now supplies fan-created, film-inspired or aspiring content that can serve as further promotion of the game. As such, this mode can be considered both a feature designed for player engagement and social interaction, but also one intended to generate greater promotion and fan-created hype around the game: combining the presumed or encouraged interactions between players (on the internet as “paratextual realm” [Mittell 2015, 262]), with the game’s inherent cinematic aesthetic, and the ability to create cinematic content from it. This is a logical current end-point for a studio that, as this article has outlined, has overtly endeavored to cultivate a public image as a company which combines elements of cinematic history and

¹³ For example, one competition involved the creation a music video for a band that had made a song featured on one of the game’s radio stations. See ‘Rockstar Editor Contest’.

¹⁴ A huge range of these original short films can be found by searching for ‘GTA V Director Mode’ on YouTube.

production (and therefore quality) into their video game titles. Moreover, Rockstar are a potent example of the way video game companies actively harness promotional materials as paratextual sites to seek legitimation for the ways in which they have “constructed authenticity”, as Adrienne Shaw (2015, 11-12) has explored.

Rockstar have always borrowed from pre-existing cultural genres, as well as specific film characters, narratives, themes, and/or other audio-visual elements and conventions, reworking these diverse cinematic components into new video game experiences. Yet in the case of *Red Dead Redemption*, *L.A. Noire*, and *Max Payne 3*, Rockstar developed a discourse of cinematic authenticity by expanding it further outside of the texts. Referring to specific films that support the image of cinematic history Rockstar attempt to mediate—specific Hong Kong action films, westerns, or *noirs*, for example—legitimizes the fact they have created textual representations in terms of their own interpretations of what gun-wielding cinematic action heroes can do, what the “complete western experience” was, or how a game about classic Hollywood cinema can be authenticated by using the same production processes *as* Hollywood. That is, in order to support claims that they offer a “complete”, or otherwise interactive experience of pre-existing genres, paratextual materials attempt to orient potential players toward a specific way of reading or accessing cinematic history. In this sense, the creation of an exclusive version of much wider genre canons is fundamental to the construction of a consumable, marketable discourse for their upcoming releases.

Considering the film-historical knowledge that players are encouraged to bring with them “into” (Gray, 2010, 26) their experience of the game, as it is deployed in these Rockstar-authored paratexts, tells us much about video games’ intertextual intersections with cinema history and genre formation, and particularly the way developers can use this relationship to market gameplay experiences: creating their own “discursive cluster” (Mittell, 2001, 11) to build up a cinematically authenticated picture of what it is their products offer, and the specific cultural foundations they speak to. This capitalises on the inherently “multi-dimensional” nature of genres as phenomena, not fixed entities (Neale, 2000, 2), and thus the discursiveness of their formation in film criticism, for the company’s own promotional ends.

By promoting cinematic authenticity in terms of not only the elements contained within the text—gameplay experience, virtual world, narrative themes, playable protagonists, and so on— but also informing what is *behind it*—the research and development process— Rockstar actively harness this discourse of cinematic legitimation, not just relegating this duty to reviewers and critics: deploying “cross-media metaphors” (Mittell, 2015, 2) as a promotional strategy in itself.

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