

Manifest Destiny 2.0: Genre trouble in game worlds

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Similar to other forms of media, video games have cultural impacts beyond mere entertainment; they make claims about the world and influence users to “value certain stories and genres over others” (2). Video games differ from other forms of media, however, because they require “physical action on the part of the user for the work to exist” (5) and thus depend on users to engage more directly with the narrative. In *Manifest Destiny 2.0: Genre Trouble in Game Worlds*, Sara Humphreys questions how durable literary genres inform the procedural rhetoric of game worlds. She considers how game developers draw from well-established generic formulas to create realistic game worlds for players to exist within, and she explores the cultural implications of reinforcing problematic genre tropes.

Building on the work of early communication and rhetoric scholars like Andrew Galloway and Mark Wolf, Humphreys agrees that video games must be understood as a wholly unique form of media for the modern age. She fills a notable gap in scholarship by diverging from criticism related to genre classification to instead focus on the rhetorical function of genre in game worlds. Humphreys notes that she is “less interested in classification or the ‘what’ of genres” (6) and more interested in considering “the social and cultural implications of making Westerns and hard-boiled noir (and, by extension, other durable genres) playable” (3). In questioning the social and cultural significance of genre, Humphreys aligns with scholars Amy Devitt and Carolyn Miller in arguing that literary genres “induce social action” (4) by attaching significance to various social and political situations and contexts. As users play games based on literary genres, they are reinforcing cultural lessons embedded within the game worlds.

Manifest Destiny 2.0 focuses specifically on *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and *L.A. Noire* (2011), two video games developed by Rockstar Games, as well as the games' respective relationships to the Western and hard-boiled noir literary genres. The text is divided into six chapters; the

first three chapters focus on the Western and the way its genre conventions inform the procedural rhetoric of *Red Dead Redemption*, and the final three chapters consider the role of hard-boiled noir in the development of *L.A. Noire*. To clarify why she works with these two distinct genres, Humphreys recalls Richard Slotkin's assertion that the hard-boiled detective genre “began as an abstraction of the essential elements of the frontier myth” (8) and ultimately recognizes how the video games and their respective genres overlap. The protagonists of each game are “descendants of frontiersmen, who exemplified rugged individualism, capacity for violence, stoicism, and hardness” (4), and both game worlds incorporate a “socially Darwinist, neoliberal landscape” (9), bringing the frontier into the modern era.

In Chapter One, Humphreys investigates how “*Red Dead Redemption* embodies frontier ideals performatively” (21) and modernizes the Western frontier myth by arguing that the ludo-frontier functions as a “safety valve for the pressures brought to bear by the continued repercussions of the 2008 economic collapse” (11). Chapters Two and Three address how colonialism appears in *Red Dead Redemption*, focusing on the role of Mexico and the portrayal of Indigenous peoples in the protagonist's worldview. Chapters Four and Five consider the role of gender in *L.A. Noire*, arguing that “this game world persuades players to privilege a certain kind of rugged, frontier-style masculinity” (12) and reinforces misogynistic beliefs by suggesting that female murder victims “violated the sanctity of their middle-class lives by corrupting their domestic purity” (93). In the final chapter, Humphreys illustrates how the plot of *L.A. Noire* ultimately critiques the American Dream, as the game's finale suggests that the nation's corrupt leadership conspires to make it unattainable for the average citizen.

Although Humphreys makes a strong case about how genres guide the creation of game worlds, *Manifest Destiny 2.0* focuses solely on two games made by the same developer. As such, the text provides a narrow view of the medium and its cultural influence. There is certainly work yet to be done as we see narrative-based video games gain popularity in the modern moment. As one of the first scholars to move beyond the debate between narratology and ludology, Humphreys acknowledges these vast remaining gaps in scholarship and calls on other scholars to expand on the work done in *Manifest Destiny 2.0*—asserting that game worlds are “the primary means by which stories are told in the twenty-first century” (11).