

Digital Western Dreaming

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Abstract

This chapter explores John Carroll's metaphysical sociology through an exploration of four noted video game narratives: *Bioshock*, *The Last of Us*, *Red Dead Redemption* and *That Dragon, Cancer*. The video game analyses offered here rest on two core dimensions of Carroll's work. This first is his Nietzschean inquiry into the modern crisis of meaning. The second is his theoretical reading of culture itself. The four case studies suggest that, as an emergent narrative medium, video games are providing a new forum for retelling key modern stories that Carroll's sociology helps illuminate.

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Introduction

In John Ford's Western epic, *The Searchers* (1956), Ethan Edwards leads a band of frontiersmen on a quest to find Debbie, his young niece kidnapped by Comanche Indians. Over many years, and stretched across the film's arresting Monument Valley backdrop, the search party gradually dwindles to just Ethan himself and Martin Pawley, a part-Indian man who had been adopted as a boy by Debbie's murdered parents. *The Searchers* is a central modern text in the work of sociologist, John Carroll, and the scenes in which Ethan and company journey through Monument Valley echo key aspects of Carroll's thinking. First, there is the quest itself. A small party of men, and eventually just two, wander the frontier deeply unsure about what they hope to achieve. Indeed, this is no simple, rational quest to rescue the proverbial damsel in distress. Ethan makes clear on a number of occasions that,

having been torn from the cultural milieu into which she was born, and presumably re-socialised into Comanche life, Debbie would be better off dead. This, then, is instinctively about culture, and about how life loses its meaning when cultural ties are undone. The Monument Valley backdrop tells us something else important about Carroll's sociology. As Ethan makes his way across its desolate vastness, his dogged pursuit is witnessed by the many sandstone monoliths that inhabit the landscape like somnolent gods. A higher order frames this human story, though we can never be quite sure about the extent to which it pays heed to our goings on.

This chapter explores certain key dimensions of Carroll's *metaphysical* sociology through an exploration of four noted video game narratives: *Bioshock*, *The Last of Us*, *Red Dead Redemption* and *That Dragon, Cancer*. To the reader uninitiated into this digital space and emergent cultural sphere, video games might seem an unlikely, perhaps even heretical, place to study Carroll's grand sociological themes. Indeed, since the early days of the medium, video games have, at best, been largely dismissed in public discourse as a time-wasting escapism, and the exclusive domain of boys and young men with little better else to do. At worst, video games have been viewed as a dangerously antisocial pursuit that rewards violent inclinations (e.g., Anderson & Dill, 2000; Irwin & Gross, 1995) and, more recently, as a medium that encourages unhealthy attitudes towards women (Ratan et al., 2015). As with any caricature, there are grains of truth to these negative assessments, but such indictments fail to take into account both the numerous 'positive potentialities' (Bertozzi, 2014) of video games and the medium's intriguing evolution as a unique narrative medium. The purpose of this chapter is thus two-fold: to demonstrate the relevance of Carroll's sociology to a particular aspect of 21st century digital culture; and to highlight, by way of noted examples, the increasing capacities of video games to tell stories of cultural significance.

A different kind of sociology

Carroll's work represents a different kind of sociology to that with which readers might be familiar. Both within and outside its borders, sociology has become increasingly synonymous with inequalities and social justice, and Carroll is less at odds with this focus than simply a world apart. By his own estimation, Carroll's (e.g. 2008a: 3) sociology follows Weber, a self-classification that rests on two pieces in Weber's diverse body of work: the conclusion to *The Protestant Work Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1905), and the later lecture, *Science as a Vocation* (first published 1946). In both, Weber questions the capacity of secular

humanist culture to sustain itself without a guiding spiritual framework, and this apprehension over the ‘disenchantment of the world’ (Weber, 1946: 155) is at the heart of Carroll’s work. In truth, however, he is better understood as a *Nietzschean* sociologist. Indeed, the Weberian disenchantment explored by Carroll is, even by Weber’s (e.g. 2002: 191) own admission, merely an extension of Nietzsche’s earlier critique of modernity.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to attempt a full survey of Carroll’s sociology (see chapters from Dickson, Murphy and Tester, respectively, for broader and illuminating surveys). In the reading of video game narratives offered here, I focus on two core dimensions. This first is Carroll’s Nietzschean inquiry into the modern crisis of meaning. Famously encapsulated in the German philosopher’s ‘Death of God’ (Nietzsche, 1882) proclamation, it is essentially a concern over the shaky metaphysical foundations of secular culture—that hubristic modern effort to place the individual human, rather than God, at the centre of all things. In *The Wreck of Western Culture*, Carroll’s (2004: 1) assessment adopts the form of searing indictment akin to Alan Bloom or Philip Rieff:

We live amidst the ruins of the great, five-hundred-year epoch of humanism. Our culture is a flat expanse of rubble. It hardly offers shelter from a mild cosmic breeze, never mind one of those icy gales that regularly return to rip us out of the cosy intimacy of our daily lives and confront us with oblivion... We are homeless in our own homes.

In later works—most notably, *The Western Dreaming* (Carroll, 2001) and *Ego and Soul* (Carroll, 2008a)—the indictment is significantly tempered by Carroll’s examination of the cultural forces that continue to offer metaphysical solace to ordinary people. In *Ego and Soul*, cultural vitality is principally found in the common sense of the lower-middle-classes, and in the narratives of popular film and television that still grapple with the ‘big questions’ (Carroll, 2008a). In *The Western Dreaming*, hope lies in the enduring relevance of archetypal stories wrought from our Ancient Greek and Christian foundations: ‘The Western world is in the process of being thrown back onto its deepest resources’ (Carroll, 2001: 6). Importantly, however, hope here remains tentative. While ‘the stories are close by [and] some have unwittingly found them’ (Carroll, 2001: 6), the sparks of vitality struggle against the broader cultural malaise that informs *The Wreck of Western Culture*’s more damning critique.

The second aspect of Carroll's sociology to which this chapter is indebted is his broader reading of culture itself. Increasingly central to Carroll's evolving view of what 'culture is, and does' (Carroll, 2008b: 5) is the role of narrative as metaphysical anchor and binding social force: 'Without the deep structure of archetypal story, a life has no meaning... Without Story, the temptation has been to withdraw into self...' (Carroll, 2001: 9, 11). Here, Carroll echoes Nietzsche's (2003: 40) view of culture as a redemptive 'veil of illusion', only without the latter's more cynical inference of wilful human misapprehension. Perhaps more importantly, narrative has also increasingly become Carroll's principal methodology. This is true in two senses: in his use of narratives as a means of reading cultural trends; and in the way he has increasingly presented his own theses as narratives in and of themselves. From an empirical perspective, such an approach to cultural inquiry will always remain open to critique, though Carroll appears to view himself as a somewhat unique mixture of storyteller and sociologist. Indeed, when engaging with Carroll's sociology, one must first take a Kierkegaardian leap of faith and embrace the idea that truth and fiction might be one and the same.

Carroll's methodology appears to place as much, if not more, stock in the insights of art and narrative as it does in any form of scholarship. Here, the act of telling resonant stories represents the 'collective consciousness' (Durkheim, 2006) of culture working through the storyteller and his/her individual sorrows and passions. In other words, the great storytellers are vehicles through which a society 'tells itself what it is' (Orgad, 2014: 137). In *The Wreck of Western Culture*, Carroll's choices of significant texts convey two dimensions of his thinking to which he has largely held in subsequent writings. First, and as outlined, the key works are those with wide and enduring appeal that seek to illuminate our shared metaphysical dilemmas. Moreover, Carroll sees venerable lineages operating here in which seminal earlier texts find themselves reborn in later ones—to give one of the more idiosyncratic examples (Carroll: 2002), he sees David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) as the late-modern heir to Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness*. Echoing literary critic, Frank Kermode (1979: 81-83), Carroll (2007: 7) appropriates¹ the Jewish term 'midrash' to denote this process: 'the art of reworking stories so as to bring them up to date.' With respect to the second dimension of his thinking, Carroll adheres to a broader definition of narrative 'texts' in which painting and sculpture sit naturally alongside the more conventionally understood narrative mediums of literature, theatre, film and television. Here, Rembrandt and Poussin are as much *storytellers* as William Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad or John Ford. In later works,

Carroll (2008a) argues that popular film and television have all but replaced their high culture counterparts as the most vital spheres. Most recently, he has suggested that television has now overtaken cinema in cultural pre-eminence. For Carroll (2015a), this most recent shift begins with *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), HBO's existential take on the mobster genre in which mob boss, Tony Soprano, laments the meaninglessness of his life on his therapist's couch.

A different kind of narrative²

In this chapter, I argue that the metaphysical themes highlighted by Carroll have also begun to emerge in the increasingly mainstream digital space of video games. There are two starting points for understanding what sets video games apart from the similarly visual mediums of film and television as a vehicle for narrative: the notion of video games as a 'ludic' phenomenon—or video games *as games*—and the accompanying notion of interactivity. In the emergent field of games studies, much debate has focused on the extent to which video games should, first and foremost, be seen as a ludic, rather than narrative, phenomenon (Simons, 2007). Indeed, while the heated tensions that once marked this debate have abated (Wesp, 2014), consensus on how to define the field's central concept remains (fascinatingly) elusive. To briefly summarise my own open position, while Juul (2005: 224) is right to argue that 'narratives are basically interpretative, whereas games are formal', the distinction works more in the abstract than it does across the increasingly diverse contemporary landscape of what we, perhaps now loosely, call 'video games.' Moreover, to quote Swalwell and Wilson (2008: 3), any understanding of contemporary video games that fails to recognise the increasing inseparability of narrative and gameplay 'is suggesting a definition and a range of enjoyment in gameplay far narrower than that used by players, journalists, and industry professionals.' The emphasis here is thus broadly on video games as a 'fictional form' (Atkins, 2003), and the case studies I examine can each be seen as noteworthy examples of games 'that borrow heavily from literary and cinematic conventions in the construction of something that resembles a game/fiction hybrid' (Atkins, 2003: 22).

Conversely, the notion of interactivity—of the 'passive' spectator becoming the 'active' player—is equally crucial to understanding even the most story-driven video game. Darley's (2000) formulation, in which he highlights the paradox inherent in the passive spectator/active player distinction, provides a useful basis from which to proceed. According to Darley (2000: 151), however much a game might aspire to narrative sophistication, narrative itself is always, to some degree or another, 'decentered' against the medium's

instrumental ludic precepts. In turn, any notion that the player possesses a more active relationship with video games than does the spectator with cinema rests on a narrow, kinesthetic understanding of ‘activity’:

Players are often perceived as being more active than viewers are, yet, this is only true—or at least with respect to the computer game—in a vicariously ‘physical’ sense... interactivity in the computer game involves a kind of relative or regulated agency: the constraints of the game allow players to choose between a limited number of options. However, such ‘active participation’ should not be confused with increased semantic engagement. On the contrary, the kinds of mental processes that games solicit are largely instrumental and/or reactive in character... passive spectators of conventional cinema might be said to be far more active than their counterparts in newer forms (Darley, 2000: 163-164).

Again, Darley’s characterisation of video games as being principally kinesthetic and ‘goal oriented’ is more or less accurate depending on the game in question. Indeed, traditional lines of prioritisation between the medium’s ludic and narrative dimensions are very much blurred in contemporary games such as *Journey* (2012) or the similarly existential *Dear Esther* (2012), both of which possess a relative scarcity of challenging puzzles and so forth, and even less in the way of the frenetic gameplay often associated with the medium.

In viewing gameplay as a discrete aspect of video games, Bogost’s (2007) notion of procedural rhetoric is helpful. Evaluations of the medium’s capacity for meaning-making and ‘semantic engagement’ are often informed by an implicit view of gameplay as a sort of ideologically neutral, or empty, backdrop against which narratives, meanings, and other interpretable aspects of a more traditional text might (or might not) emerge. For Bogost (2007: 340), gameplay itself is a form of rhetoric in which, whether consciously or unconsciously, a given game’s ludic systems inevitably convey a worldview: ‘We must recognize the persuasive and expressive power of procedurality. Processes influence us . . . the logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions.’ Here, Bogost offers a view of formal gameplay systems comparable to film studies’ understandings of ‘realism’ in cinema in which ‘the mechanical imitation of nature’ (Arnheim, 2006: 158) is always underpinned by an ‘implicit ideology supporting and structuring a given work’ (Wood, 2006: 46). With respect to this study, it is thus important to

engage in a ‘different kind of literacy’ (Atkins, 2003: 61) in which gameplay can be no less suffused with meaning than the more explicitly rhetorical dimensions of narrative and representation.

Bioshock

Irrational Games’ *Bioshock* is widely cited as an example of what video games have begun to achieve as a narrative medium. It is also a game that very much operates in Carroll’s thematic territory. Set in ‘Rapture’—a dystopian underwater city founded on a sort of hyper-allegiance to the objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand—*Bioshock* is a first person shooter (FPS) in which the player engages in bloody combat as the narrative teases out the mysteries of the city’s downfall and the hero/avatar’s true purpose. Praised for both the immersion of its dystopian world-building and the weight of the themes with which it grapples, the game is essentially an interactive reimagining of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.³ Echoing Conrad’s meandering departure-journey-arrival structure (Carroll, 2002)—a structure that proves ideally suited to this player-driven mode of storytelling—*Bioshock* functions as a Nietzschean critique of modernity’s secular attempts ‘to find in individual being some quality that might give enduring dignity to the human condition’ (Carroll, 2015b: 611).

In *Bioshock*, the ‘quality’ in question, the ‘saving truth’ (Carroll, 2002: 33) that is ultimately exposed as fraudulent, is Ayn Rand’s (1957: 735) belief that, through unrestrained individualism, humankind might find a heaven ‘here and now and on this earth’. The mouthpiece for Rand in *Bioshock* is Rapture’s founder, Andrew Ryan: a shadowy, Kurtz-like figure modelled off the sort of mid-20th century American entrepreneurs who found themselves taken with Rand’s (1957) seminal *Atlas Shrugged*. Much like Marlow’s search for Kurtz, *Bioshock* takes the player on a journey through the ‘horror and absurdity’ (Nietzsche, 2003: 40) of Rapture and towards a confrontation with the reclusive Ryan. The city itself is in ruins and, echoing the Atlantis of Plato’s (380 BCE) *Republic*, its submergence conveys the notion of a civilisation drowned by its own hubris. Scattered across *Bioshock*’s various environments are the remnants of Rapture’s citizenry: a deranged collection of subhumans who serve as the FPS’s requisite enemy combatants. Hostile and altogether pitiful, they exist solely to gratify their own individual consumptive desires which, in this case, centre on a power-giving drug referred to as ‘ADAM’. In order to meet the game’s increasing challenges, the player is also compelled to consume ADAM—the pessimistic allusions to our own consumer society are clear.

Again, like Carroll's reading of Kurtz, the objectivist Ryan is *Bioshock's* failed 'new Christ, the one for our time who might point the way, teach how to live, explain the meaning of it all' (Carroll, 2002: 34). The supreme individualism on which Ryan founds Rapture is summed up in one of the many 'audio logs' the player is encouraged to discover across the game: 'A man chooses, a slave obeys'. The moment the player steps foot in the underwater city, the consequences of this ideology are exposed as Kurtz's 'The horror! The horror!' (Conrad, 2007: 98). In isolation, *Bioshock* could be viewed as a narrower critique of Randian individualism, rather than the broader, Carroll-esque critique of humanist ambitions being argued here. However, in *Bioshock's* two sequels, both essentially the same in core narrative structure and gameplay, the thematic backdrop is redirected towards an indictment of other redemptive modern philosophies. Set in Rapture once more, *Bioshock 2* shifts the focus onto the city's collectivist counter-movement. Here, it is the Orwellian tendencies inherent in secular notions of a shared 'humanity' that come under scrutiny. The third game in the series, *Bioshock Infinite*, takes the player to the new destination of 'Columbia': a city in the sky founded by the religious fundamentalist, Zachary Hale Comstock. In Columbia, Comstock's nostalgic desire to resurrect Christian-American society has become an oppressively autocratic state governed by notions of racial purity, and by blind devotion to its human founder, rather than to God. Indeed, Columbia's 'artificial firmament' (Maloney, 2015: 158) is built on the self-negation that underpins all fanaticism: the ostensible force with which Comstock has constructed his new Christian society is an inversion of his unconscious profanity. Viewed together, then, the three *Bioshock* instalments can be seen as a bleak tripartite assessment of the *supra-ideological* revolutionary impulses that modernity's crisis of meaning habitually engenders.

The Last of Us

Lowering its sights onto the struggles of ordinary people, and one of the most awarded video games in the history of the medium, Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013) offers an interactive retelling of both Cormack McCarthy's (2006) *The Road* and Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore's (2013) similarly-themed comic book series, *The Walking Dead*. In much the same fashion as these close literary descendants, *The Last of Us's* post-apocalyptic setting essentially functions as a backdrop for exploring questions of ethics and morality, and the challenge of doing what is right when the cultural 'veil of illusion' is lifted. To summarise the plot, the player adopts the role of single father, Joel, whose daughter is killed by police when

they try to flee Austin, Texas during a nation-wide pandemic. The game opens with this as prologue, a device aimed at establishing the repressed grief underpinning Joel's motivations as the player's avatar. Twenty years later, Joel is a smuggler living in the wake of a society that has ripped itself apart. Now, there are only tenuous pockets of community, along with the oppressive state troops who police quarantine boundaries and the roving gangs who prey on the weak. Outside the city's boundaries also reside hostile swarms of mindless, zombie-like victims of the pandemic who serve as the game's principal moment-to-moment gameplay antagonists. Still broken by the death of his daughter, Joel is offered a large sum of money to smuggle a young girl named Ellie out of Austin and into the hands of 'The Fireflies': a seemingly virtuous revolutionary enclave seeking to restore democracy to America. Ellie's significance lies in her unique immunity to the disease, and the Fireflies believe they can develop a vaccine by examining her biological makeup.

As stated, *The Last of Us* explores the challenges of maintaining a sense of morality amidst devastation and chaos. In the 'Five Theses' that frame *Ego and Soul*, Carroll (2008a: 4-5) draws a decisive and contentious line between the singularity and function of a given culture, on the one hand, and the universality of morality, on the other:

Unconsciously, all humans know the true and the good, and are inwardly compelled to find what they know, through their lives and what they see. They sense that there is some higher order framing their existence... Culture is those myths, stories, images, rhythms, and conversations that voice the eternal and difficult truths... Cultures are singular. Fundamental moral laws and human rights are universal.

Post-apocalyptic narratives test Carroll's thesis by exploring what happens to people when the sociocultural restraints that seem to elicit principled behaviour—Rieff's (1990: 37) civilising 'thou-shalt-nots'—are severely undermined. On the face of it, the verdict in stories like *The Last of Us* is mixed: while central characters usually confirm the thesis through their dogged moral fortitude and self-sacrifice, they operate against a social milieu very much governed by the 'everything is permitted' logic of Dostoyevsky's (first published as a serial 1879-1880) *The Brothers Karamazov*. However, on closer inspection of *The Last of Us*, the message is quite clear: morality is always a matter of 'individual conscience' (Carroll, 2008a: 101) regardless of whether or not a given culture gives collective 'voice' to its 'fundamental

laws'. When these laws are broken—as in the cases of the exploitative gangs and the oppressive, similarly cruel border troops—the wrongdoers have merely acted in what Sartre (2003) would call 'bad faith'. The immorality of such characters simply makes them *less human*, and arguably no better than the shuffling zombies that skulk the city's outskirts.

Furthermore, during their treacherous cross-country journey to meet the Fireflies, it is the young Ellie, rather than Joel, who emerges as the story's moral centre. She teaches the broken man how to be whole again, and how to live compassionately. This is important: born into a post-pandemic world of anomie, Ellie should by all rights be as feral as the worst of the gang members. In *The Road*, McCarthy (2006: 5) portrays a similar father-son dynamic: the former sees the latter as his 'warrant' and postulates that 'If he is not the word of God God never spoke.' When Joel and Ellie finally reach the Fireflies, the core message of individual conscience is brought to the fore. Joel discovers that the group intends to remove a portion of Ellie's brain in order to examine, and hopefully extract, whatever it is that makes her immune to the disease. This will kill Ellie and, reluctant as they ostensibly seem, the group's scientists are adamant that this represents humanity's only hope. Choosing the sanctity of individual life over the utilitarian needs of a 'theoretical masses' (Carroll, 2008a: 99), Joel kidnaps an anaesthetised Ellie, fighting his way out of the Fireflies' compound. A humanity that would intentionally kill innocents is not worth saving—the means never justify the ends.

During the final stages of *The Last of Us*' second act, there is a scene that demonstrates the unique power of video games as a narrative medium. A key element distinguishing this from most other post-apocalyptic stories is that it is set in an America gradually being reclaimed by nature, rather than in the sort of wasteland George Miller established in his Australian desert-inspired *Mad Max* franchise (1979-2015). Joel and Ellie arrive in Salt Lake City and, while traversing the ruins of a large bus station, the young girl glimpses something remarkable outside and presses Joel to join her on a balcony to take a closer look. Presumably originating from some now-disused zoo, it is a family of giraffes foraging across the station's grounds. One of the adult giraffes lifts its head towards the balcony to greet the pair and Ellie pats the out-of-place creature. Importantly, Joel only follows suit in this gesture of affection if/when the player responds to an onscreen prompt. Joel and Ellie then take a moment to watch as the family drifts away across the disused grounds, an environment that now appears more liberated than rundown.

Like Tony Soprano's captivating suburban encounter with ducks in *The Sopranos* (Carroll, 2015a; Maloney, 2015: 116-117), the existential respite of this event speaks to a 'higher order'—indeed, everything else in *The Last of Us* feels as though it orbits around this one brief moment. In cinema, the significance of such moments is commonly conveyed by a 'lingering shot': the audience is required to bear witness for as long as the director sees fit, and whether they like it or not. By placing control of Joel in the hands of the player during this sequence, *The Last of Us*' designers ostensibly relinquish their narrative authority, and can only *hope* that their audience will linger with Ellie on the balcony long enough to absorb the full poignancy of what is being offered. Indeed, any player who purchased *The Last of Us* wishing only to fight zombies and gang members is free to pull Joel immediately away from the balcony in order to trigger a return to the video game action. As in real life, such moments of abiding significance are only accessible to those with the requisite tools of contemplation, those with 'ears to hear'.

Red Dead Redemption

The Western cinematic oeuvre of John Ford looms large in Carroll's sociology. Indeed, in arguably his most recognised book, *The Wreck of Western Culture*, Carroll devotes far more space to its exegesis than to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or any other similarly important work. Central though it remains to both film criticism and American cultural history, the Western as a cinematic genre has seen a steady decline in relevance over recent decades. As Agresta (2013) laments, 'Other, newer genres like superhero movies... have cowboy movies outgunned with younger generations and international audiences'. True as this may be in cinema, 2010 saw a marked video game revival of the Western in Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption*. Among the highest selling games of that year, and with a highly-anticipated sequel scheduled for release this year, *Red Dead Redemption* is a genuine Western in every sense, rather than the sort of digital shooting galleries with 'cowboys and Indians' aesthetics that preceded it. The plot sees the player adopt the role of John Marsden, a retired outlaw who is offered amnesty by government authorities in return for bringing members of his former gang to justice. Having also taken his wife and son hostage, Marsden is left with no choice but to acquiesce to the government's Mafioso-style offer. In gameplay terms, *Red Dead Redemption* follows the 'open-world' format of Rockstar Games' wildly successful *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (1997-2013) in which players are given free rein to inhabit the virtual world as they see fit, moving the story forward at their own pace and engaging in free-form (and often violent) activities in the interim.

While its aesthetic and soundtrack evoke Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns, and Marsden himself is arguably more Eastwood than Wayne, *Red Dead Redemption* is an interactive narrative steeped in Ford. The story itself, with its themes of revenge, tragedy and the birth of modernity, combines elements from *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). The core narrative structure—again, a meandering one that naturally lends itself to the video game format—follows the former. Marsden's cross-country mission to capture or kill 'Dutch's Gang' echoes the journey of Ford's Ethan: 'Nothing will stop him. For seven years he rides through the snows of northern winter to the scorching desert summer' (Carroll, 2004: 240). Also like Ethan, Marsden is 'a very violent man, at any point as likely to add to the moral havoc as restore order' (Carroll, 2004: 240). Here, however, the player is encouraged to enact these destructive character dimensions as an integral part of the gameplay experience, especially during the free-form moments in between the narrative's progression. More importantly, the metaphysical purpose of Marsden's violent mission to rid society of its last vestiges of savagery represents a Ford-like 'clearing of the field' (Campbell, 1993: 338) in the founding of modernity: 'The desolate and dangerous frontier is being tamed for the future, so that decent communities can settle and build. This is the making of America' (Carroll, 2004: 237-238).

According to Carroll, Ford would ultimately come to see the quixotic nature of his foundation myth through the process of building his cinematic oeuvre. As Kathleen Yorke puts it in *Rio Grande*, 'All this danger to serve people as yet unborn—and probably not worth saving.' In this sense, *Red Dead Redemption* is very much post-Ford: a reverent contemporary evocation of the director's myth in which a cynical critique is also embedded. Unlike Ford's modern representatives who seem more effete than nefarious, *Red Dead Redemption's* bureaucrats and bean counters are explicitly presented as self-serving creatures who disingenuously hide behind the values of 'democracy and The Constitution, of education and development' (Carroll, 2004: 249). When authorities arrest the local snake oil salesman, the knowing Marsden demands they let him loose: 'He's a harmless old fraud, the kind of man who built this country.' The sense of what has been lost in modernity's civilising of the 'untamed frontier' is also conveyed in the various virtual environments that the player can inhabit across the game. The smaller settlements and open plains are hives of gameplay activity and danger. The fictional industrialising centre of 'Blackwater', like Shinbone at the end of

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, is lifeless: ‘All is clear and distinct, but the streets are dead’ (Carroll, 2004: 250).

For modernity to fully establish itself, the savage hero who cleared the field must himself also finally depart the scene. In *The Searchers*—Ford’s earlier, more hopeful work—Ethan simply rides into the sunset. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the entire narrative orbits around the death of the similarly violent hero, Tom Doniphon. *Red Dead Redemption*’s Marsden must also take ‘the pollution of all the blood-guilt with him’ (Carroll, 2004: 246) as the final establishing stage, and in this more cynical reading of Ford’s myth, it is the corrupt authorities who make it so. Unbeknownst to Marsden, he is the final outlaw on their list of men to kill and the ensuing tragedy is again conveyed with a force unique to the video game form. Having made sure his wife and son are safely away from his ranch, Marsden readies himself for the inevitable confrontation with the posse sent out to end his life. The sequence begins with a non-interactive cinematic ‘cut scene’ in which Marsden edges open a barn door to see sixteen men with guns at the ready. After taking a deep breath in resignation, he fully opens the doors to face his antagonists. The scene then shifts into gameplay mode, with control of Marsden placed back into the hands of the player. At this late stage of the long interactive experience—length of play can be anywhere from 18 to 40 hours or more, depending on how long one wishes to inhabit the virtual West—the player will ideally have come to feel as accomplished in gunplay as Marsden himself is meant to be in the narrative. However, while ostensible control is placed in the player’s hands at the onset of the shootout, there is no way of ‘winning’ the gameplay sequence. However skilled the player might have become during the game, and however many antagonists he/she is able to dispense with during this sequence, the shoot out can only end in Marsden’s death. This, quite literally, is gameplay as an expression of heroic tragedy.

That Dragon, Cancer

The final video game under examination is very different to those discussed thus far. Winner of the ‘Games for Impact’ award at The Game Awards 2016, *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016) is a low-budget ‘indie’ title from Numinous Games, a small team headed by husband and wife designers, Amy and Ryan Green. While *That Dragon, Cancer* has not enjoyed the wide appeal of the other games studied here, and therefore fails to meet a key criterion in Carroll’s view of what constitutes texts of cultural significance, the game warrants inclusion here for what it says about the possibilities of high art in the digital era. The main function of all art,

according to Carroll (2008a: 2-3), is to grapple with the ‘three age-old, fundamental questions... “Where do I come from?”, “What should I do with my life?”, and “What happens to me at death?”’ For Carroll, as suggested, one of the important cultural trends of the previous century is high art’s abdication of this responsibility in favour of an abstraction ‘emptied of all spiritual and moral content’ (Carroll, 2008a: 124). In its patent aspirations to high art rather than entertainment, *That Dragon, Cancer* suggests there may yet be life in this allegedly enervated and nihilistic cultural arena.

That Dragon, Cancer is a video game only in the most fundamental sense of giving its audience a sense of interactive control in how things play out within a digital space. Through a series of dream-like abstracted sequences, the game invites the player to inhabit the Green family’s deeply personal journey in dealing with the all but inevitable death of their young son from a rare form of brain cancer. Both of them devout Christians, Amy and Ryan Green wanted to convey to others the ‘grace’ (Green, n.d.) inherent in such irrevocably heart-breaking experiences. For this game designer couple, the interactivity of their chosen medium made it an ideal forum for their message:

We made a film about a couple that loses their only son to cancer. We also wrote a children’s book... However, none of those could do what I believe an immersive videogame can do... The truth is that any game that has been created or will be created contains only the illusion of choice. Dialog trees, branching narrative, and puzzle mechanics all drive the player towards a predetermined end... I believe that the creator of any universe has the power to limit choice. But a good creator gives choice because they empathize with the player. This creator recognizes that the player has been hurt, and treated viciously. This creator wants the player to love his son, like he loves his son. This creator ultimately wants good for the created world, and for its inhabitants (Green, n.d.).

In other words, video games provide self-contained universes in which designers lend only a cursory sense of freewill to players. The narrative itself is predetermined and, in this case, tragic. The allusions here to the Green’s religious outlook on life are clear. However, *That Dragon, Cancer* ultimately represents the couple’s struggle to maintain their beliefs amidst the senselessness of their son’s passing.

With its 20th century abstract-modernist aesthetic, integration of audio recorded by the family during the tragic period, and postmodern self-referencing of video game tropes, *That Dragon, Cancer* is undoubtedly a game with contemporary high art aspirations. However, it is most noteworthy in its use of these techniques to return high art to the function that Carroll argues has long been abandoned by its other traditional forms. Indeed, the interactivity of the piece—the invitation from designers to inhabit the pain of their experiences—compliments the artist’s ideal aim of lending to his/her particular anguish a more universal sense of the ‘eternal, primal suffering’ (Nietzsche, 2003: 25). Importantly, and as suggested, while Amy and Ryan Green are both practicing Christians, the overarching message of *That Dragon, Cancer* is not one of blind faith. On the contrary, and in a narrative tradition that stretches back to the works of both Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy, the unfolding tragedy rests on the tension between Amy’s withdrawal into notions of an afterlife and Ryan’s ever-increasing descent into Nietzsche’s ‘horror and absurdity’. Ultimately, a peace is found not unlike Weber’s (1946 :155) appeal to stoicism in the face of modern ambivalence: ‘It is an invitation to walk in the garden with those that suffer, and struggle; who make mistakes; who doubt; and are trying their hardest to love in a world that seems undone...’ (Green, n.d.).

Everything old is new again

The four case studies examined here suggest that, as an emergent narrative medium, video games are providing a new forum for retelling key stories in the modern cultural tradition—a phenomenon that Carroll himself might see as a form of digital ‘midrash’. It would be an overstatement to suggest that these retellings—the doomed search for charismatic secular guidance; the struggle to maintain morality in the face of cultural disintegration; the tragic nature of modernity’s foundations; and the modern fragility of religious faith—attain the level of pre-eminence that marks their literary and cinematic forebears. However, the existence of such themes in this digital space is nonetheless significant. Indeed, while there may not yet be a ‘masterpiece’ of video games akin to, say, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Ford’s *The Searchers*, the medium is demonstrating in these case studies an unmistakable inclination to place itself within the cultural traditions that Carroll’s sociology helps illuminate. There is a paradox here that echoes Wolcott’s (2013: 121) thoughts about the ‘conservative impulse’ in 1970s punk rock, and Wood’s (2006: 353-354) assertion of what truly amounts to ‘innovation’ in art: that is, rather than being best understood as birthplaces of the never-before-seen, new and resonant creative phenomena can often represent a return to the ‘deepest resources’ of what has come before.

In terms of understanding the digital innovation through which these video games have sought to renew stories of modern cultural significance, what we are seeing is the integration of interactive elements that invite the audience to become ‘players’ rather than ‘spectators’. While the narratives themselves may be largely predetermined, the journeys from beginning to end are marked by a sense of audience participation in precisely how things play out. It is a form of storytelling that aligns itself to the broader characteristic of digital cultural ‘prosumption’ (Beer and Burrows, 2010) in which consumers of a given cultural artefact become agents in the production process. While this dynamic is more explicit in the user-generation of amateur videos on YouTube, or in similar content across other social media platforms, video games can be seen as an arena for more traditional author-driven storytelling in which prosumption tendencies nonetheless assert themselves. All of this, in turn, echoes the late-modern ‘individualising’ shifts traced by Giddens (e.g. 1991), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (e.g. 2002) whereby culture has increasingly become a ‘do-it-yourself’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 47) arena in which ordinary people are compelled to ‘produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves’ (Beck et al., 1994: 13). Indeed, a game like *Bioshock* can very much be seen as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* re-imagined for audiences who now expect higher degrees of agency in their engagements with narrative.

If you were to ask the average player what the interactivity of inhabiting video game narratives elicits, he/she would be likely to respond in terms of ‘immersion’—to quote Stuart (2010), ‘We lose ourselves in games’. In the earlier days of cinema, this sense of losing oneself in the presence of alternate worlds—that spatially and temporally destabilising sense of ‘really being there’—was similarly crucial to the appeal of the moving image. However, while we may still be compelled by any number of onscreen film or television narratives, the moving image itself has gradually lost much of its novel power as an immersive technology.⁴ To understand what is occurring in audiences’ captivation with these immersive narrative innovations is to once more enter into a paradox. Here, I turn to Carroll’s own deepest resources: the work of Nietzsche and, specifically, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche, 1872). In this, Nietzsche’s first and arguably most influential book, the philosopher outlines his theory of the nature and origins of Ancient Greek tragedy. While Nietzsche’s theory of Greek tragedy is ‘complex... and fraught with apparent contradictions’ (Maloney, 2015: 5), his core insight into the medium’s origins helps shed light on any immersive narrative innovation.

According to Nietzsche, the earliest forms of Greek tragedy saw the actors, chorus and audience, along with any rational distinctions between fiction and reality, all folded into each other within the greater ‘Oneness’ (Nietzsche, 2003: 17) of storytelling as a transcendent ritual event. Indeed, what *we* would categorise as an ‘audience’—in terms of passive spectators distinct from what is occurring on stage or screen—had no equivalent at the birth of tragedy: ‘there was no fundamental opposition between the audience and the chorus: for everything was simply a great, sublime chorus of dancing, singing satyrs...’ (Nietzsche, 2003: 41). The increasing rationality that, over time, would ultimately come to define Ancient Greek thought and culture would see a corresponding shift in the conception of theatrical representation towards something comparable to how we conceive of theatre, film or television today: that is, as fictional forms from which we, as audience members, remain spatially and temporally at a distance. In this sense, the immersive interactivity of video games can be seen as an attempt to return to the oneness of storytelling; a oneness in which ‘reality’ dissolves and, like the earliest ancient Greeks, we become fully invested members of that ‘great, sublime chorus’.

In conclusion, these four video games demonstrate a marked impetus towards Carroll’s metaphysical ‘big questions’—those questions of individual and collective meaning that cut across the social and economic divisions with which conventional sociology has become increasingly associated. As a digital medium historically dismissed as little more than base entertainment, this maturation of video games speaks to the human-social inclination to infuse even our most ostensibly ignoble pursuits with deeper cultural functions; with what anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973: 449), in his influential study of Balinese cockfighting, refers to as ‘a kind of sentimental education’. As stated in this chapter’s introduction, video games might seem an unlikely site for metaphysical inquiry, and I remain unsure of how Carroll himself—a scholar of archetypal stories who has argued ‘that with any story, it is the major telling that counts’ (Carroll, 2001: 16)—might view the work undertaken here. However, as Carroll (2015a) implies in his more recent assertion that television has transformed itself into Western culture’s principal ‘generative source’, we need to stay open to the possibility that the ‘timeless challenge of culture’ (Carroll, 2015a) might again be taken up in newer cultural forms that begin life inauspiciously, as mere ‘entertainment’.

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¹ In Jewish theology, midrash is a complex concept that resists simple definition. It is perhaps most easily equated to biblical exegesis and Kermode's and Carroll's use of the concept as more or less a stand in for terms such as retelling, reinterpretation or re-imagining is, by Jewish theological standards, very loose.

² This section represents a revision of my earlier games studies outline in Maloney, 2016.

³ Another similarly lauded video game, *Spec Ops: The Line*, offers a second interactive retelling of *Heart of Darkness*, further confirming Carroll's argument about the significance of this core narrative across the modern cultural landscape. Taking its thematic cues more from Francis Ford Coppola's, *Apocalypse Now*, than from Conrad's original work—and thereby curtailing certain key elements in Carroll's reading of the blueprint—the game is peripheral to this discussion.

⁴ The recent and all but failed effort by Hollywood to promote 3D imagery as the new standard in commercial cinema can be seen as an attempt to revitalise the medium's immersive powers.