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The Interplay of Thematic and Ludological Elements in Western-Themed Games

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Abstract: The Wild West has been productized and remediated a number of times over the last hundred of years – and even earlier than that. Computer and video games are a relative newcomer in this string of remediations, distilling the essential elements of the Western even further into archetypal scenes, characters and modes of play. Expanding on our previous works on genres, we study a colorful selection of Western-themed games, 31 in total, with the aim to reveal how a firmly established and codified theme affects gameplay. A well-established theme, such as the Western, manifests itself at very different depths based on the kind of game we are dealing with – at minimum, it acts as an artificial surface that does not affect the gameplay at all. At the other end of the spectrum, the theme affects all the aspects of a game, ranging from its audiovisual presentation to the narrative and the actions available to the player.

Keywords: Western, game genres, video games, thematization

Résumé en français à la fin de l'article

Introduction

Western fiction is, in effect, as old as the Wild West itself: the dime novels and traveling shows of the 1800s already presented a romantic, codified version of frontier life with its heroes and villains, and later media in the form of radio plays, movies, comics and tv series have all contributed to the same process in their own particular ways. Over a timespan of roughly 150 years the genre has been greatly reinterpreted and reinvented, for example, in the European context where the perspective has inevitably been indirect and colored by local trends. Starting from the 1970s, numerous electronic games have also depicted the American frontier – often in an even more distilled form, owing to both technical constraints and selective remediation of earlier depictions.

It is easy to note how many aspects of the mythological West are directly applicable to games. Many Western movie scenes are game-like to begin with: think of Tuco's proficient target shooting in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) or the fateful poker scenes, as seen in countless other works. Gunplay, bank and train robberies, fistfights, horseback riding and rodeo – a simplified version of cowboy life itself – lend themselves to arcade action, whereas notorious bandits, lawmen, gold rushes and indian¹ wars provide easily adaptable elements, victory conditions and goals for the narrative arc of a game. Furthermore, the ever-continuing (if undulating) commercial popularity of Western lore has, on its own behalf, ensured its constant presence across almost all mass media, with video games being no exception here.

While Western cinema, in particular, has received notable attention from film scholars, in video game studies the thematic has largely been omitted, with only a handful of mentions in books or articles that have often dealt with other, more general topics (e.g. Herz, 1997, 68–69; Saarikoski, 2004; Dickerman, Christensen and Kerl-McClain, 2008; Clearwater, 2011). Recently, more attention has been paid to the Western genre and its significance for gameplay (Buel, 2013) but this examination has relied on relatively few examples. Expanding on our previous works on genres (Junnila, 2007; Heikkinen and Reunanen, 2015), we set out to study a representative selection of Western-themed games, with the aim of revealing how a firmly established and codified theme affects gameplay. As part of the earlier study (Heikkinen and

¹ We use the archaic term indian, as opposed to native American, here to be in line with the source material.

Reunanen, 2015), we had already compiled a considerable 463-item list of electronic and other games representing nine decades, providing us with an opportunity to examine a thematic genre almost in its entirety.

First we will look into existing discussions on video game genres; even if concepts, such as video game genre, are commonplace in colloquial speech, they tend to be elusive and hard to define. Next we present our research material and method in more detail, and explain how and why certain games were selected for further analysis from the larger lot. Finally, we discuss the results with concrete examples on the interplay of the thematic and ludological aspects of Western games, followed by some generalizations that hopefully pave the way for further game genre-related studies.

Genre in Video Games

Jaakko Kempainen's study on the use of game genres by publishers and resellers reveals how imprecise the concept is. Aspects ranging from game mechanics to the purpose of the title (such as education) or the setting can all be decisive factors when trying to define the genre of a particular game. Kempainen also notes that same titles may occur with a different classification depending on the service. An interesting, yet often completely overlooked, factor in genre definitions is how they are used in marketing for economic gains (Kempainen, 2010).

Clearwater (2011) and Lee et al. (2014) have arrived at similar conclusions: instead of trying to hopelessly craft a consistent ontology, game genres have to be considered as multidimensional entities where a number of factors are at play simultaneously. We do not even aspire to solve the ontology/taxonomy problem here, but rather explore how the most relevant dimensions defining a game affect each other. We are particularly interested in the ludological and thematic axes, keeping in mind that other ways to classify exist.

To clarify, ludological here refers to game rules and gameplay, indicating genres like first-person shooter, action adventure, puzzle, real-time strategy and so on, whereas theme and thematic genre relates to the kind of visual-aural world the game rules have been embedded in, such as science fiction, fantasy and the Western.

Game studies have tended to shy away from the thematic axis of genres, focusing on the ludological aspects instead (Clearwater, 2011) or an examination of the tension between the ludological and narratological elements (Apperley, 2006) instead of the theme as such. We see there is still plenty of room and need for studies that explore the thematic dimension, a perspective that has a long history in fields such as cinema and literature studies. (e.g. French, 1977; Wood, 1986). Within film, genre has become seen for example as a means of negotiating audience expectations, reception and critique of works in relation to what is perceived as common within a genre (Neale, 1990). In the comparatively long history of Western cinema, the genre has endured subversions, revisions and adaptations to different political and cultural contexts (Cooke, Mules and Baker, 2014).

The correlation between the ludological genre and the thematic one is also interesting on a more general level. Usually ideas about the narrative and the game logic feed each other during the design process of a game (Järvinen, 2008). Without a doubt, other aspects also affect the outcome: for example, the choice of a visual style, the intended target group and the overall purpose of the title, among others (Lee et al., 2014).

The definition of a Western is potentially abstract and applicable to different eras. A Western narrative is often about individual stories within a larger political frame (Cooke, Mules and Baker, 2014), such as railroad expansion with its land grabs and the conflicts between homesteaders and cattle lords. McGee (2007) also offers that Westerns are about political class tensions, whereas Bazin (1971) likened the Western to an epic, with its own superheroes. To have a clear objective and an understanding of the Western genre, we have chosen to examine games that have narratives based within the geographic time frame of the frontier expansion, civil war and the so called “Wild West”. In addition, we have looked for visual cues such as cowboys with wide-brimmed hats, six-shooters, stagecoaches and townscapes, regardless of their historical veracity.

A well-established theme with its well-known iconography, such as the Western, manifests itself at very different depths based on the kind of game we are dealing with – at minimum, it may act as an artificial surface that does not affect the gameplay at all. Mapping the strength of the thematization (see Järvinen 2008) across the dataset will uniquely illuminate different aspects of this interplay. As the chosen titles represent four different decades, they provide an

opportunity for chronological analysis as well; genres are not set in stone, but they, too, do change, and lose or gain popularity (cf. Kemppainen, 2010; Clearwater, 2011).

Research Material and Approach

In this study, we used a list of 463 Western-themed games as the starting point: mainly digital games, but some older pinball machines and electromechanic theme park games as well. The digital games are for a wide range of platforms from old game consoles (e.g. Atari VCS, Mattel Intellivision and Nintendo Entertainment System), home computers and arcades to modern PC, console and mobile games.

The list is used as a basis for a quantitative analysis, with the intent to map how the Western theme connects to different ludological genres. Ludological genres tend to have certain recurring sets of actions the players can take, called game design patterns (Björk & Holopainen, 2005). One way of defining ludological genres is based on which set of game design patterns (game architecture) can be observed in games of the genre (Lessard, 2014). In our research we have chosen actions to be in the center of our attention, as they differentiate game experience from other media. With actions in this study we mean any action that the player can take in the game as a player, not action in the broad sense of chases, explosions, shooting and the like, even though those certainly have their place in Westerns.

Our primary interest in the quantitative part of the study is to assess whether the Western theme has driven games towards certain ludological genres, or has the theme been utilized in a wider number of different genres, possibly ending up with different kinds of sets of actions still somehow relating to the theme.

We have chosen to look at one particular subset of games in our list in more detail – commercial games published for PC and consoles from 1990 to today. Mobile games have started forming their own recurring patterns of game design and thus new genres. They can, to some extent, be mapped to more traditional ludological genres, but there are also differences, so our numbers are more representative of console and computer gaming than most recent mobile games. Also, home computers and consoles have been very different platforms before the nineties – for example, some modern ludological genres rely on computing power that simply wasn't

available in the 1980s – so in order to give a contemporary account we decided to leave the oldest games out of this part.

To have data to contrast the Western-themed games with, we have listed other 268 games from year 2006, divided into ludological and thematic genres with the same genre classification system from an earlier study (Junnila, 2007). This data can be found in Appendix 1. Junnila defined a number of thematic and ludological genres, and analyzed the games to find out how the ludological and thematic genres intersected (ibid.). With this data we can compare the Western genre distribution into ludological genres to games with other themes. The ludological genres we use here are taken from the 2007 study, meaning that some modern subgenres are missing – for example MOBAs (Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas) would have to be put under the RTS (Real Time Strategy) genre, even though it has developed into a very specific direction later on.

The definitions of the ludological genres are partially rooted in previous research, coupled with our own understanding of basic genres. Some games are difficult to classify by nature, such as hybrid approaches that combine many ludological genres. Although these challenges with classification may somewhat affect the numbers, the big picture should still be representative of titles published in 2006. The games were categorized into genres from the Finnish games magazine *Pelit*, which in year 2006 was mostly reviewing commercially viable PC and console games, so they should be comparable to our Western games sample. Naturally, these games being from the same year make a difference, as we could already notice in Table 1 how some genres have been more popular during a certain decade.

The data from the earlier study needed to be adapted for the present research, as the categories do not correspond exactly. Thematic genres were loosely defined, and did not include Western as its own genre. If there had been any Western games in the magazines in 2006, they probably would have ended up in the thematic genre of adventure (meaning an adventurous version of real life, as in *Indiana Jones* and *James Bond* series, or the Wild West), while some of the reality-based games, for example the American civil war strategy games, would have been classified as Realism (as the *War* genre denoted games representing 20th century conflicts).

Quantitative Analysis

Our quantitative analysis essentially consisted of defining the main ludological genre of a title and then adding the numbers together. As mentioned in the previous section, the oldest and non-digital games are not part of the figures. Table 1 shows the results of the quantitative analysis. Not surprisingly, action games with different ludological subgenres is the largest genre. This seems quite intuitive, in the same way as Western movies tend to have a strong action element in them, revolvers, chases, fist-fights and duels being core aspects of Western imagery. Not that shooting would only appear in action games – most Western games, whatever the ludological genre, seemed to include shooting of some kind, as we later show in the qualitative part of the study.

Certain gameplay ideas and ludological genres do not mix well with the Western theme at all. It is not difficult to understand why, for instance, the racing subgenre isn't present – while horseback riding can be a part of Western games (e.g. the horse races in *Red Dead Redemption*), it is less likely that a Western theme would be the basis for a complete driving game. Especially flight simulator elements would be difficult to justify in a realistic 19th-century Western environment.

Within the action genre, the target shooter subgenre (which is not part of the general genre system used in this research) appeared to be especially popular – probably as Western themes have been a common theme in arcade cabinets with light pistols, pre-dating the whole electronic game phenomenon, later evolving through games like the video-based *Mad Dog McCree* (American Laser Games, 1990). It seems especially in the last year or so, the target shooter subgenre is undergoing a resurgence in Virtual Reality format – there were multiple VR target shooting games in online game store Steam's Early Access at the moment.

Beat 'em ups are also very rare (only one occurrence), although some action oriented games have a fist-fight element in them. Action adventures and FPSs fit into the Western theme rather well – FPSs evolved from the more generic action shooters with advancing technology. Action adventures evolved out of adventure games as more dynamic actions have been added to the traditionally scripted gameplay, still keeping the strong story elements. 2D platformers die out after their popularity in the 1990s with no platformers in the early 2000s. During the last decade

platformers have re-emerged (e.g. *Gunman Clive* [2012], *Angry Fun Run: Cute Wild West* [2013] and *SteamWorld Dig* [2013]).

| | Western games 1990–1999 | Western games 2000–2009 | Western games 2010–2017 | Western games 1990– 2017 | % of all 1990– 2017 | Examples |
|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Action | 12 (26) | 11 (27) | 32 (50)) | 55 (103) | 25.8 % (48,4%) | Wild West Guns |
| Racing | | | | | 0 % | |
| First Person Shooter | 3 | 11 | 7 | 21 | 9.9 % | Call of Juarez |
| Action Adventure | 4 | 4 | 7 | 15 | 7.0 % | Red Dead Redemption |
| Platformer | 7 | | 4 | 11 | 5.2 % | Gunman Clive |
| Beat 'em Up | | 1 | | 1 | 0.5 % | |
| Strategy | 18 (22) | 12 (20) | 14 (16) | 44 (58) | 20.7 % (27.2%) | Helldorado |
| Real-time Strategy | 4 | 8 | 2 | 14 | 6.6 % | Sid Meier's Gettysburg! |
| Manager | | | | | 0 % | |
| Sports | | 1 | | 1 | 0.5 % | |
| Roleplaying | 7 | 3 (4) | 6 | 16 (17) | 7.5 % (8.0 %) | Hard West |
| MMORPG | | 1 | | 1 | 0.5 % | |
| Puzzle | | 4 | 7 | 11 | 5.2 % | Gunpowder |
| Adventure | 11 | 6 | 6 | 23 | 10.8 % | Gold Rush! |
| Music/ Dancing | | | | | 0 % | |
| Simulator | | | | | 0 % | |
| Total | 66 | 62 | 85 | 213 | | |

Table 1. This table shows how Western-themed games for the PC and consoles between years 1990–2017 divide into different ludological genres. The first three columns are based on the decades, the

fourth is the overall situation, the fifth shows the percentages based on the overall situation, and in the last column we already take a peek at the qualitative part of the study, by naming some example games we have analyzed in detail. The genres on the left are grouped so that the main genre is first, then some of its subgenres with a similar background color, and the numbers in parentheses after the main genre refers to the numbers when the games are counted from all the subgenres of that genre.

The second-biggest genre is strategy. It is notable that about half of the games in the strategy genre and its subgenres were games set in the U.S. civil war, a popular topic for strategy games especially in the 1990s. About 80 % of the Western strategy games of the 90s were about the civil war, in the 2000s about half of the games were civil war -themed, while in the 2010s only 20 %. Even if the civil war period collides historically with the Wild West times, it could be argued that the civil war games have less to do with the most immediate Western identifiers like cowboy hats, revolvers and such. We still count these games into the Western genre, as civil war themes are a strong element or undercurrent in many Western movies, but had they been left out, the numbers would look different. Traditional strategy games with moving troops on the battlefield clearly fit the civil war much more naturally than lone gunslingers. Nonetheless, there were also other Western strategy games, with for example city management games and a few tactical games where you maneuver a band of individuals in a skirmish instead of larger military units.

The third-biggest ludological genre is adventure, including both graphic adventures and text-based games. Adventure games with their scripted story driven mechanics are quite different from many other genres of games, and in that sense they are very flexible to any thematic setting. Having their roots in riddles, text-based adventures often employ puzzles as main game problems, partly embedded in the spatial logic of the game (Montfort, 2005). While there were more adventure games in the 1990s, some have also been published over the recent decades. Tracing the ludological elements within a fully text-based, turn-based game can be challenging, as the game can fluctuate between novel-like storytelling and a computer-generated description derived from an invisible, internal game state. As adventure games and interactive fiction can describe any activity through text, the developers can choose any topics they like into the stories they tell. Text-based games also usually do not rely on repetitive challenge-based interaction like shooting, but the actions the player does are always in context.

The fourth-biggest ludological genre is role-playing games. This was initially surprising, but it turns out Japanese RPGs (JRPG) are the key to the mystery – in the 1990s and 2000s, all the Western themed RPGs were from Japan. It should be noted that Japanese games rarely feature a historical 19th-century Western environment, but rather science fiction and fantasy hybrids that might even be largely situated outside a Western setting. However, the long tradition of “Weird West” films and other media makes us consider them as part of the thematic genre. Approximately ten years ago Western-themed JRPGs seemed to quickly disappear.

Puzzle games are the fifth biggest category. It is still quite small, and as many puzzle games have a more abstract nature, so even the few Western-themed puzzlers are quite superficial in connecting the theme to the play mechanics. The more story oriented and thus thematic games with puzzles are really adventure games. Puzzles can also be a part of action adventures.

The rest of the ludological genres are almost nonexistent – one Western mini golf game was deemed a sports game, but again, the connection to the theme in it was fairly tenuous. No music/dancing games have been found so far, and also no simulators, even though it should be noted that in this research the simulation genre is defined as very realistic simulations (such as flight simulators), as opposed to resource management style simulators that have been classified as strategy.

When comparing the genre distribution to the one shown in Appendix 1, we can see that the Western genre is relatively evenly distributed between different ludological genres, apart from a few exceptions, such as the complete lack of racing games. If we compare the distribution to the different thematic genres observed and classified in the earlier data, it seems the different thematic genres there are more tied to a tighter set of ludological genres, but there is a possibility that this results from a small sample size. If we only look at the Western games from 2006, they are not as evenly distributed. Indeed, there were six strategy games, five action games, one RPG and one adventure game that year.

The fact that most genres are present in a mostly similar distribution than in the 2006 dataset when all the games are counted can be explained in at least two ways: the Western theme bends to a wide variety of ludological genres, or, alternatively, the thematization of games is so weak in general that any theme can be used in most settings (cf. Järvinen, 2008). If the latter is true, it

would mean that the ludological genre distribution is not highly connected to the theme. It would be interesting to see more data and make comparisons to assess which theory seems more accurate. We will discuss thematization further in the next section, which uses qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

In addition to the quantitative approach, we wanted to go deeper through qualitative analysis of a number of games. We chose a set of 31 games from our complete list for a more careful analysis – see Appendix 2. Their thematic and ludological aspects were mainly analyzed by watching longplay² videos online, but we also played some of the games ourselves.

While forming an overview of each game, we put special focus on the actions the player can take in each game. As both the ludological genre conventions and the theme tend to affect what actions are available, we wanted to see how the Western theme would manifest itself in different games. We picked games from different traditional ludological genres so that we could see if there are differences in the strength of thematization between them.

Weak vs. Strong Thematization

One of the main questions of this research is how much the Western theme has affected game design. Many game development projects might have had a ludological genre in mind in the beginning, with associated game mechanics, but the theme is then added in the process of thematization, which refers to finding a fitting metaphor for the abstract game mechanics, adding a new layer of meaning to the game.

Aki Järvinen (2008) mentions some important points about thematization. It is about mapping metaphorical meaning to the game system, and it can be used to maintain the diegetic coherence of the game world. The chosen theme also affects player expectations. Weak thematization refers to a situation where the theme does not affect the game rules at all (e.g. a Western-themed chess game), whereas strong thematization means there is a stronger bond between the theme and the rules of the game (e.g. firearm behavior loyal to the time period in an FPS). The theme

² Walkthroughs that do not particularly focus on speed, as opposed to *speedrun* videos.

can be too complex to function as a metaphor for the dynamic system, resulting in the need for cutscenes, or the theme's complexity increases the complexity of the game.

As different ludological genres tend to have different levels of complexity, we analyze how strong or weak the thematization is in the chosen games, what kind of concrete differences the games have, and how the strongest examples of thematization work in the case of Western games.

Analyzing Interaction

Interactivity is, no doubt, a core aspect of games, and thus analysing what kinds of actions a player can take in a game is an important part of discovering the interplay between the thematic and ludological aspects. Generally, ludological genres already define many of the available actions, but we are especially interested in seeing if the thematic setting brings something unique to the pool of actions. This also includes the question of how deeply the theme can be planted into the regular actions of a genre, potentially allowing a deeper sense of involvement toward game mechanics and the actions available.

There can be several levels of interactivity inside a game, having to do with the directness or indirectness of the action as it relates to the represented action and the involvement it requires from the player. For the purpose of analysing interactivity in games, we have built a model with levels of interactivity based on our observations of the games. We concentrate on the following levels of interaction:

- **Basic interactions.** Something the player can do at will whenever in the main game mode/s. Usually this involves a button the player can press to do that certain action-for example jumping in a platformer game or shooting in a first-person shooter.
- **Actions in context.** Some games allow certain actions in a certain context-for example the player can open a door when being close to a door, or ride a horse when there is a horse available.
- **Different game modes.** Some games have a main mode where most of the gameplay happens, but allow a different set of actions in sub-modes. Open world games often have certain minigames where the normal action (for example jumping and shooting) are not

available, but it is possible, for instance, to play poker inside the game world, a scene which has its own actions like betting and changing cards. This kind of compartmentalization may also result in different button mapping schemes on the game controller.

- **Scripted actions.** This refers to moments in games where an interaction can be used once in the game for a specific purpose, that usually isn't possible through the game engine. Whereas actions in context are repeated throughout the gameplay, a particular scripted action is usually an one-off occurrence. For example, the physics engine of the game wouldn't usually allow shooting a rope with a bullet, but this could be programmed into one specific moment in the game to give the player a chance to save a friend from being hanged. The ludological genre of adventure games tends to consist of a series of scripted actions, whereas other ludological genres rely more on dynamic systems. Also quick time events that make cutscenes more interactive to the player fall into this category.
- **Actions in cutscenes.** Actions that game characters take in cutscenes are one way of incorporating certain thematic actions into the game that could not be handled inside the gameplay. This is distinct from a scripted action in that the player has no control inside the scene and may not foresee what events will take place. We will not actively analyse these in this research, but they are still worth mentioning as one way the game designers put tropes and general drama into the game. But as these techniques are not specific to games, they do not really tie into the question of the correspondence between ludic elements and the theme, as any kind of cutscene can be inserted in any kind of game.

Different Abstraction Levels

While some game genres let the player experience things more directly, for example through seeing the avatar performing the actions in real time as the player presses the buttons, some genres keep the player further away from the immediacy by different representational methods, or blend abstract game concepts into the actions. In the Western context it makes a difference if a shooting scene is activated through a text command, a point'n'click action or a gun-like game controller, as seen in fairground-type target games.

It sounds logical that less abstract game mechanics would lead to a stronger thematization in a game – at least from the perspective of a weakly thematized game having an appearance that is easy to change to another one. In a game where the player takes the role of a person in an environment that purports to be the old west, the thematic elements have ludological bearings too. In a game like *Mad Dog McCree*, that features a light gun and holster at an arcade, the duel mode is harder to re-thematize as the action the player takes so concretely mimics the real world action of a Western duel.

Discussion

In this section we present the results of the qualitative analysis described above. The main angles are the actions offered to the player and the strength of the thematization. We also look at how the selected titles reflect the codified Western imagery familiar from other media. We do not go through all the games one by one, but rather discuss interesting and representative examples we came across over the course of the study. A full list of the games can be found in Appendix 2.

The actions we found in the 31 games are listed in Appendix 3. We left the scripted moments and actions in sub-modes out of this list, as the basic and context-specific actions are the ones the player mostly interacts through when playing. We will also discuss some of the latter in other examples below, for example how sub-modes have been used in certain titles to make the thematic experience deeper.

Typical Actions

Looking at the action list in Appendix 3, it can be seen that shooting and moving are the only actions that are available in most of the games. Also inventory management and interacting with the environment in one way or the other are used in some games. In this set of games, it was extremely rare to have dialogue between characters as a context-specific action, even though of course many more games used it in cutscenes or scripted moments – shooting really is shown as the main way to solve problems in the Wild West. In contrast, *Law of the West* (1985) is almost entirely made of dialogue choices that result in shootouts or peaceful resolutions, a game concept that would be somewhat out of place in a non-Western theme, but understandable within Western fiction conventions.

Riding is a surprisingly rare player action in these games, considering how important a role horses generally play in Westerns of all kinds. Many games have enemies on horseback, which suggests that bringing the Western into the actions of the player is much harder than bringing it to the visuals and other dynamics of the game. In the abstract environment of *Gunfright* (1986) the horse is a Pac-Man-esque power-up that provides speed and immunity to the player character, whereas in a modern open world game like *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), the horse substitutes for a vehicle, enabling horseback chase scenes and other modifications within the gameplay dynamics.

The lack of diverse actions and more deeply thematic actions within a single game partly follows from the fact that many of the games analysed are so old. Not only has there been less memory and pixels to add detail to the game world, but also the controllers might have been limited to digital 8-way sticks with a couple of buttons, suggesting a limited range of actions to begin with. Now that we continue discussing the strength of thematization, we will mostly concentrate on examples from the recent games, where the less technically limited platforms offer more space for game developers to explore possibilities in game design. Furthermore, the resources available for modern game developers have been vastly greater in most cases, compared to rudimentary early examples.

Mapping out the actions in Western-themed games shows that it was rare to see strong thematization in the games, at least on the level of the actions offered to the player. Many of the games did not noticeably differ from their ludological genre at large: in some cases even trying to deduct the theme based only on the list of actions would be difficult. Rail shooter games³, for example *Atari Outlaw* (2012), *Gunslingers* (2011) and *Wild West Guns* (2008), are about shooting and reloading. *Gunman Clive* (2012), a platformer, offers jumping, running and shooting. *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!* (1997) features actions that have to do with moving troops on the battlefield. All of these examples are quite standard representatives of their ludological genres.

Only a couple of the analyzed games have actions that really seemed unique to the Western theme. There are other aspects of the game logic that could also affect the strength of the

³ Shooting games where the player travels on a predefined path with effectively no way of affecting its direction.

thematization, for example the procedures like enemy AI, and what kind of dynamics the interplay between the mechanics and the procedures create, but as we focus on the player actions these are left out of our central analysis.

While most games in our sample feature only weak thematization, the most interesting case was *Red Dead Redemption (2010) (RDR)*. It is probably the largest Western-themed game production ever done (at the time of writing the sequel had not yet appeared). As an open world action adventure game it offers tens of hours of gameplay, should the player want to explore all the nooks and crannies of the world. The sheer size of the game made it an interesting yet challenging game to observe, and because of the size, we probably missed some of its aspects.

All in all, the amount of actions in *RDR* was vastly greater than the amount in any other game we analysed. 82 different actions were listed from the gameplay videos. Naturally, the basic actions of an action adventure, like moving around, aiming, shooting and changing weapons are present, but also numerous other actions, many of them in sub-modes. We will next discuss which of these seem to contain particularly strong thematization.

Unique Actions

When looking at *RDR*, one of the strong thematic elements that affects the game mechanics is horseback riding, which in different ways employs a large portion of the game. In addition to riding the horse and being able to fight from horseback, it is also possible to tame horses in a rodeo-like fashion – an action that would not make much sense in a different theme, such as cars in a game like *Grand Theft Auto*. Horse riding becomes a kind of a sub mode inside the game, trying to balance the player character on the horse without falling down. As noted earlier, interestingly only 3 games out of the 31 we analysed included horse riding as an active part of the game.

This also brings us to another rather unique game mechanic, namely lassoing. Being able to throw the lasso and then drag something/somebody towards you and then tying them up is something not often observed in other games, even though the action can be incorporated in a science fiction/fantasy setting – the gravity gun in *Half-Life 2* (2004) and the grapple in *Just*

Cause 2 (2010) spring to mind. The player can also carry tied up persons, and place them on the horse.

Call of Juarez (2006) features a slightly similar action, as one of the characters has a whip that can be used, for example, for climbing to certain locations. While it is not as definitely a Western action as throwing the lasso, it has clear ties to the Western setting. Whips can be thematically connected to lassos, cattle drive or horse riding. In Western films, a whip is central in films dealing with American slavery, but several other examples, such as *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *Unforgiven* (1992) show that it is clearly part of the standard imagery as well.

Sub-Modes and Minigames

Some of the sub-modes appear to add to the strength of the thematization. Many sub-modes were observed while looking at gameplay videos, but according to the Wiki of the game (RDRWiki, 2018), there are even more sub-modes that were not even observed during this research.

The most iconic mode is the duel mode. Duels are a strong element in Westerns at large⁴, and could be the whole basis for earlier, simple Western-themed shooting games, such as *Gun Fight* (1975). In larger games, it has become a sub-mode. The separation of the duel mode in an older game, such as the aforementioned *Gunfright*, might point to a technical necessity, but even new games appear to separate duels into sections that follow different rules.

Even though shooting is a big part of *RDR*, it is interesting that the duel has still been made into a sub-mode (Figure 1), and here the main difference to the basic shooting action is that you have to draw your weapon as part of the duel. In the normal mode the player can just change weapons and start shooting. In the duel mode the player's attention is drawn to the drawing of the weapon by the option to bring the hand closer to the gun's holster with a button on the gamepad, and then the drawing itself is a timed challenge.

⁴ Complete movies have been built around duelling, "who is the fastest on the draw?". To name just a few: *The Gunfighter* (1950), *The Last Challenge* (1967), *A Gunfight* (1971) and the crown jewel of duel fetishism, *The Quick and The Dead* (1995).

In the shooting part (in which time is slowed down), opponents can be disarmed by shooting their hand or weapon. These small details not present in the normal fighting mode enable classical dramatic Western moments. The sub-mode makes the action of dueling less abstract, and thus more strongly thematized.



Figure 1. Duels are given special attention in *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games 2010), too.

Call of Juarez also features game mechanics that relate to Western duels. A special sub-mode can be activated by drawing your weapons, time slows down and two crosshairs move across the screen, giving the player a chance to shoot multiple shots at multiple enemies in a short time. This mechanic seems to have a connection to duels, even though the mode can also be activated in a normal fighting situation.

It has been pointed out that the Western film duel establishes an alternate space for different moral norms, opening a possibility of a so-called justified killing within a supposed Western moral code (Falconer, 2014). For instance, in Sergio Corbucci's *The Great Silence* (1968), much of the plot revolves around the notion that the person who draws last will not be prosecuted. Even if video game duels do not always have the moral poignancy and definiteness of a filmic climax, the duel-mode nevertheless establishes a separate rule space on a technical and action dimension of the game mechanics and not only as a storytelling device. This way,

the duel sub-mode and its attention to detail emphasizes that the death is not a random gunning down but an event of significance.

To return to the sub-modes in *RDR*, there are a number of other sub-modes, playing poker, arm wrestling etc. Poker has become seen as an iconic Western event, due to the presence of the game in numerous films⁵, and it is possible to cheat in poker and end up in duels, again bringing classic Western story elements into the game in an interactive way. It is noteworthy that the chain of events of cheating in poker and ending up in a duel, seen in numerous Western films, is open for the player in the form of dynamic game mechanics, instead of being merely a scripted event that happens once in a certain part of the game.

Adding a new sub-mode is always more work for the developers, so we can see that these sub-mode minigames give the game designers a chance to focus on themes that are important to the Western. Of course many of the sub-modes could be also framed in another way thematically. In *Witcher 3 (2015)* the player can play a made-up card game called gwent instead of poker. The Horseshoe Throwing sub-mode in *RDR* could easily be changed into some other challenge section in a game of a different theme. The mini game sub-mode is then not exclusive to Western, and our attention is rather drawn to observing what options and themes the player is presented with through these sections.

The theme of cards is another subject that a number of analysed games have included in different ways. In addition to the *RDR* poker sub-mode, *Hard West (2015)* and *Compass Point: West (2015)* have playing cards as part of their game mechanics. In these two games, cards were metaphors for something else than actual cards in the game world. In *Hard West*, the special skills the characters gain during the game are represented as cards (Figure 2). So instead of implementing a standard role playing game level up, with the player choosing new skills to their characters, in *Hard West* the player finds cards and can give them to the character they want. One card provides the character with an extra skill or bonus. Interestingly, it is also possible to build poker hands out of the cards, so if one character has a pair or a full house, an additional bonus is added to that character. The cards are not diegetic objects in the game world, but the poker metaphor still ties these character improvement mechanics to the theme in a loosely Western-appropriate way.

⁵ Faro was a more popular card game in the real west (see Turner, Howard and Spence, 2006).

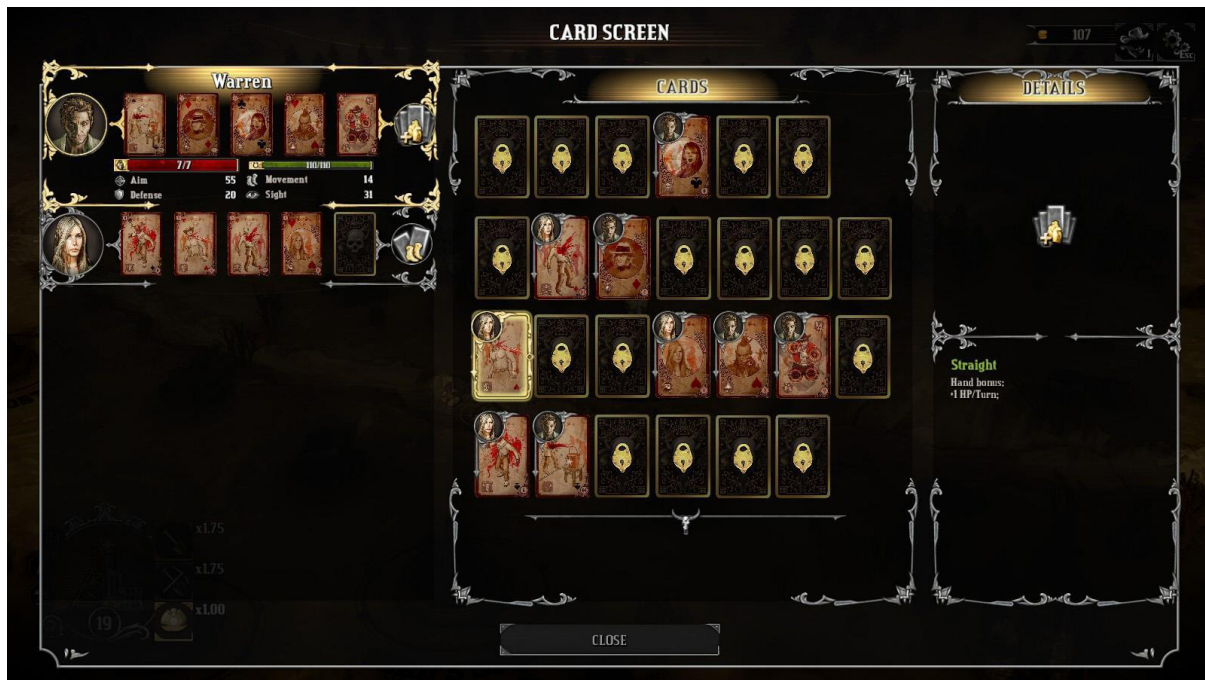


Figure 2. *Hard West*'s Card Screen, where the player can modify their characters by giving them cards that give them special abilities, and poker hands give additional bonuses.

Compass Point: West also uses playing cards as a metaphor. This time, it represents characters instead of their skills. The thematization is weaker here, as many free-to-play games nowadays use the logic of collectible card games as part of their play. Yet poker cards are more appropriate in a Western setting than in, for example, a science fiction game.

Scripted Actions

Most games rely on dynamic systems as a core feature of their gameplay, whereas fully scripted games make it possible for the game to present all actions from the perspective of the theme and story than the general game mechanics typical to the ludological genre. A good example of a fully scripted game is the traditional adventure game genre. *Gold Rush!* (1988) has very different actions available to the player at different parts of the game than the Western games from other ludological genres. The player has to type their actions into the parser, and during the game, for example the player has to brand a mule, lower a magnet and read Psalm 23. Nonetheless, many of the scripted actions in the game are things that you could also do in many other Western games (move, jump, buy, sell, talk etc.). Curiously, *Gold Rush!* does not have shooting of any kind as part of its actions at any point. This exception can be partially explained

by the lack of real-time gameplay and thus inability to make the player aim a gun, but it could also point to the authors' desire to see the text-based historical adventure game as an intellectual and educational challenge instead of a reaction game.

Gold Rush! is an old game with its restrictions, but much more recent *Hard West* also uses small text adventures as a sub-mode in the game outside the tactical fighting mode, and again, in those adventures the player can be given all kinds of very thematically specific actions, like stealing items from an old mine while exploring it etc. There is also a scripted special moment in *RDR* where the time slowing action is used in a special situation to allow shooting the hat off somebody's head, and then continuing shooting at it in the air, again recreating a moment seen in Western movies, most notably in *For a Few Dollars More* (1965). These scripted moments offer a chance to include special thematized moments into games with the price of making the situations less dynamic.

Conclusion

In this study we collected data on how Western-themed video games are spread across different ludological genres and how the theme affects the games, especially from the perspective of player interaction. We learned that the Western theme spreads out quite evenly into different ludological genres, even though there have been different trends during the past few decades, and the balance has been shifting during the years. Technological development is one straightforward factor in the history of the thematic genre, as early limited hardware simply did not provide for complex storytelling or detailed representation of game characters and scenes. Another general observation is the treatment of delicate issues – for instance, mindless slaughtering of indians would hardly be acceptable in a contemporary game.

Although Western is a theme that has lots of tropes based on its use in other popular media, our findings suggest that the theme affects games surprisingly little on the level of interaction. This is true at least in the sense that Western games do not offer to the player many actions that would not be standard in games of similar ludological genre with a different theme. Many games were and still are, essentially, about shooting and moving, despite their general theme.

Another answer may be that the Western theme only modifies the ludological actions in a very detailed scale, such as limiting weapons to six-shooters and rifles instead of submachine guns and lasers, whereas vehicles behave slightly more like horses instead of jeeps and helicopters. The stronger examples of thematization would then be found from within the different ways the ongoing action becomes subtly constrained, not immediately from the labeled actions available to the player.

In recent games featuring more sophisticated game mechanics, we could identify more ways of immersing the player into the Wild West. One example is creating sub-modes where the aspects of, for instance, a classic Western duel can be modeled in more detail, giving the player the option to bring their hand closer to the gun before drawing and disarming the opponent instead of killing. Although sub-modes are by no means exclusive to Western games, such a meticulous attention to detail in a duel scene is less likely outside this thematic genre. In addition, actions like lassoing that are difficult to imagine in another setting were found in some of the games, and some metaphorical abstract game mechanics, like improving the player character using playing cards, are lifted directly from the codified Western lore.

It would be interesting to continue the research by mapping out actions from non-Western games that ludologically resemble some of our examples to provide for comparisons, especially targeting genres where the theme plays a more central role. Furthermore, expanding the action analysis to other dynamic aspects of gameplay, such as enemy AI and other rules not strictly about player action, would be important, as the feedback loop between the player actions and the game world is so central to the experience. It might also be worthwhile to focus on modern titles⁶, as recent games show richer possibilities of expressing the theme – even though some relevant historical findings followed from the decision to include old games as well.

Game players, journalists and researchers alike continue to identify game genres chiefly according to gameplay. Our research largely confirms the justification of this categorization, but also points to interesting directions where a genre like the Western might constitute something more than a preferred thematic skinning. A complex game world like *Red Dead Redemption* is a

⁶ It would be possible to examine *Red Dead Redemption* together with Rockstar Games' other big franchise, the *Grand Theft Auto* (1997–) series. Comparing two similar games in different themes might be one way to elucidate the effects of theme on the ludic elements.

cluster of gameplay ideas bound together under the Western theme, constraints to action and sub-modes which may also reflect player preferences, and not simply a novel audio-visual differentiation. Such gameplay elements are still in a minority in defining a genre, and it remains to be seen if stronger thematization in the future will bring thematic aspects of games to the forefront also from a ludological perspective.

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Résumé : Le Far West a été produit et remédiatisé de nombreuses fois au cours des cent dernières années. Les jeux vidéo sont relativement nouveaux dans cette série de remédiations, distillant encore plus loin les éléments essentiels de l'Occident dans des scènes, des personnages et des modes de jeu archétypaux. Dans le prolongement de nos précédents travaux sur les genres, nous étudions une sélection de 31 jeux autour du thème du Far West, dans le but de révéler comment un thème fermement établi et codifié affecte la jouabilité. Un thème bien établi, tel que le Far West, se manifeste à des niveaux distincts selon le type de jeu - au minimum, ce thème agit comme une surface artificielle qui n'affecte en rien la jouabilité. À l'autre extrémité du spectre, le thème du Far West affecte tous les aspects d'un jeu, de sa présentation audiovisuelle au récit et aux actions à la disposition du joueur.

Mots-clés : Western [Far West], genres vidéoludiques, jeux vidéo, thématisation

Appendix 1

The differences of genre distribution between the 2006 sample games of all thematic genres and the Western games between 1990–2017. The genres on the left are grouped so that the main genre is first, and the subgenres are grouped with a similar background color. The numbers in parentheses after the main genre refers to the numbers when you count in the games from all the subgenres of that genre.

| | Adventure | Arcade | War | Fantasy | Sports | Sci-Fi | Crime | Realism | Horror | Abstract | All games 2006 | All games 2006 (%) | Western games 1990-2017 (%) | Western games 1990-2017 (amounts) |
|----------------------|-----------|--------|-----|---------|--------|--------|-------|---------|--------|----------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Action | 5 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 1 | 9 | 16 | | 4 | | 61 (157) | 22.8 % (58.9 %) | 25.8 % (48.4 %) | 69 (119) |
| Racing | 13 | 7 | | | 10 | | 1 | | | | 31 | 11.6 % | 0 % | |
| First Person Shooter | 4 | 1 | 12 | | | 6 | | | 3 | | 26 | 9.7 % | 9.9 % | 20 |
| Action Adventure | 3 | 1 | | 10 | | 1 | 1 | | 3 | | 19 | 7.1 % | 7.0 % | 15 |
| Platformer | 2 | 9 | | 2 | | | | | | | 13 | 4.9 % | 5.2 % | 14 |
| BeatEmUp | 4 | 1 | | 1 | | | 1 | | | | 7 | 2.6 % | 0.5 % | 1 |
| Strategy | 1 | | 8 | 2 | | 6 | | 12 | 1 | | 30 (42) | 11.2 % (15.7 %) | 20.7 % (27.2 %) | 37 (57) |
| Real-time Strategy | | | 2 | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | | 8 | 3.0 % | 6.6 % | 16 |
| Manager | | | | | 4 | | | | | | 4 | 1.5 % | 0 % | 4 |
| Sports | 1 | 1 | | | 20 | | | | | | 22 | 8.2 % | 0.5 % | 1 |
| Roleplaying | | 3 | | 11 | | 1 | | | 2 | | 17 (20) | 6.3 % (7.5 %) | 7.5 % (8.0 %) | 14 (16) |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|-----|-------|--------|-----|
| MMO RPG | | | | 1 | | 2 | | | | | 3 | 1.1 % | 0.5 % | 2 |
| Puzzl e | 1 | 4 | | | | | | | | 5 | 10 | 3.7 % | 5.2 % | 9 |
| Adve nture | 1 | | | 3 | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | | 8 | 3.0 % | 10.8 % | 28 |
| Music / Danci ng | 3 | 2 | | | | | | | | | 5 | 1.9 % | 0 % | |
| Simul ator | | | 4 | | | | | | | | 4 | 1.5 % | 0 % | |
| Total | 43 | 37 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 27 | 20 | 17 | 14 | 5 | 268 | | | 230 |

Appendix 2

List of games selected for the qualitative analysis.

1. Gun Fight (Taito 1975)
2. Oregon Trail (Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium 1982)
3. Custer's Revenge (Mystique 1982)
4. Badlands (Konami 1984)
5. Bank Panic (Sanritsu 1984) publisher: Sega
6. High Noon (Ocean Software 1984)
7. Law of the West (Accolade 1985)
8. Six-Gun Shootout: Gunfights of the Wild West (Strategic Simulations Inc. 1985)
9. Gunfright (Ultimate 1986)
10. Iron Horse (Konami 1986)
11. Gold Rush! (Sierra On-Line 1988)
12. North and South (Infogrames 1989)
13. Mad Dog McCree (American Laser Games 1990)
14. Blood Bros. (TAD corporation 1990)
15. Town with No Name (Delta 4 interactive 1992)
16. Lucky Luke (Velez & Dubail 1996) publisher: Infogrames Multimedia SA
17. Outlaws (LucasArts 1997)
18. Sid Meier's Gettysburg (Firaxis Games 1997) publisher: Electronic Arts
19. Hangman: The Wild West (e-FunSoft 2000)
20. An American Tail: Fievel's Gold Rush (Hokus Pokus 2002) publisher: Conspiracy Entertainment, Crave Entertainment
21. Call of Juarez (Techland 2006) publisher: Ubisoft/Focus Home Interactive
22. Helldorado (Spellbound 2007) publisher: Viva Media
23. Wild West Guns (Gameloft Bucharest 2008)
24. Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar San Diego 2010)
25. Gunslingers (Valcon Games LLC 2011)
26. Gunman Clive (Hörberg Productions 2012)
27. Atari Outlaw (Atari SA 2012)
28. Even Cowgirls Bleed (Christine Love 2013)
29. Gunpowder (Rogue Rocket Games 2013)
30. Hard West (CreativeForge Games 2015) publisher: Good Shepherd Entertainment
31. Compass Point: West (Next Games 2015)

Appendix 3

Table of all basic interactions and actions in context in all (31) analysed games. Excludes the scripted actions due to their different nature.. The actions have been grouped into categories. One x refers to one game with that action, and single instances of actions have just been listed at the end of each category.

Basic Weapons and Shooting

| | |
|---------------|----|
| Shoot | 24 |
| Aim weapon | 14 |
| Draw weapon | 7 |
| Reload | 7 |
| Change weapon | 4 |

Single instance actions in this category: Holster weapon, Ready weapon, Drop gun

Moving

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Walk | 10 |
| Move Character | 7 |
| Jump | 7 |
| Crouch | 7 |
| Turn | 5 |
| Stand up | 2 |
| Sneak | 2 |
| Run | 2 |

Single instance actions in this category: Sprint, Roll to side, Lie down, Crawl, Lean to the sides

Special Weapon Actions and Other Interactions with Enemies

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Throw weapon (knife/hat/tomahawk) | 5 |
| Throw dynamite/explosives | 3 |

Single instance actions in this category: Light dynamite, Use dynamite, Use special weapon, Use/remove scope, Activate Dead Eye (Slow time), Focus (zoom in to aim better), Hand-to-hand combat, Throw lasso (After you get it), Use whip (to grab hold of something, then lower yourself, climb on it, and release it), Place watch (to lure enemies with sound), Activate TNT mode and place TNT, Activate combo actions (Brawlers/Binders), Exit fire routine, Choose dialogue, Make a soldier appear, Rape, Draw gunpowder trails, Place gunpowder kegs

Inventory management

Single instance actions in this category: Open Satchel (Check inventory), Use items in inventory, Manage inventory/card screen, Change outfit to pretend being someone else

User Interface Related Nondiegetic Actions

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Turn Camera | 5 |
| Check info on character | 3 |
| Zoom in/out | 2 |

Single instance actions in this category: Scroll screen, Open/close minimap, Activate noise tool, Turn quick action mode on/off, Turn film mode on/off, Activate/deactivate 3rd person view, Highlight line-of-sight

Unit Management / Group Actions (Mainly in Strategy Games)

Single instance actions in this category: Choose character, Move unit on map, Select unit, Move on map, Place troops, Place rally flag (move units), Move artillery, Charge with cavalry, Slash with sabres with cavalry, Change formation, Shoot with unit, Shoot with cannon, Retreat, Give orders to troops (For infantry: Line, Column, Skirmish, Wheel, Advance, Charge, Double

Quick, Hold, Fall Back, Retreat, Halt and for artillery: Limber, Unlimber, Wheel, Target Infantry, Target Artillery, Auto-target, Line-of-sight, Fall back, Retreat, Halt)

Interacting with the Environment

| | |
|---|---|
| Climb (ladder/stairs) | 7 |
| Evade bullets/traps/arrows (by moving) | 5 |
| Open door | 4 |
| Ride minecart | 2 |
| Jump high from a trampoline (mushroom) | 2 |
| Explode rocks/wall | 2 |
| Use object | 2 |
| Shoot boards to break them to open door/windows | 2 |
| Read letter/text | 2 |

Single instance actions in this category: Enter/exit cover, Leap over (fence), Brake when going down steep slope, Hang from ledge, Swim/dive, Ride a log in water, Ride rocket in space, Be pushed by wind machines, Balance on tilting platforms, Walk on boulder to make it move, Open locked door with keys, Kick weak door in, Lock door, Push button, Hack down trees, Throw water (to put out fire, Escape law enforcers/Get out of sight, Hide in bushes, Interact with object in level to create better cover, Grab objects in hand, Carry objects in hand, Read Wanted signs, Watch movie in a cinema, Watch video for cards, Search for clues, Focus on important people/places/events, Sleep/Save game (Where there is a bed), Take stagecoach to travel places

Making Choices on a Map

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Look at map | 5 |
| Attack enemies (Mission) | 5 |

Single instance actions in this category: Send raiders to expand your map area, Scout missions, Build railroads

Special Actions with NPCs / Fighting

| | |
|--|---|
| Kill civilians for minus points/losing (by shooting) | 4 |
| Hand-to-hand combat | 2 |

Single instance actions in this category: Shoot blind from cover, Tie a lassoed person up, Carry a tied up person (this can also be done with a horse), Carry corpse/knocked down enemy, Knock down enemy from close range, Tie knocked down enemy up, Seduce enemy, Subdue enemy, Use ability (Fanning/Ricochet/Prayer/Scream), Use weapon ability (Cone shot), Kill enemy with jump (Mario-style), Throw objects, Save hostages (by shooting the enemies), Shoot civilians, horses or corpses to end the game, Shoot buildings and obstacles to pieces, Choose target, Steal (key), Listen to enemies (Player does this), Spot enemies shadows (Player does this)

Interacting with NPCs

Single instance actions in this category: Speak (with certain people), Accept a duel challenge, Accept missions from strangers, Push people to fall, Pay fines to clear your name when wanted, Use a pardon letter to clear your name

Obtaining Resources and Managing Your Inventory

| | |
|--|---|
| Buy/Sell items: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weapons, ammo, portables, etc. Maps and newspaper | 4 |
| Open container/crate | 4 |
| Collect armor/fire rate/money boost (by shooting at item) | 3 |
| Pick up items (weapons, ammo, thrown knife etc.) | 3 |
| Collect gold/goods | 2 |
| Collect powerups (by walking into them) | 2 |

Single instance actions in this category: Pick up ammo from trunk, Upgrade weapon, Browse shop, Loot bodies, Take (ammo, Bible), Collect flowers, Skin animals, Pick up Wanted posters to get mission, Collect healing cake pieces (by walking into them), Use medicine (when found), Upgrade battle abilities, Activate cards, Merge units

Horse actions

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Move with horse | 3 |
| Mount horse | 3 |

Single instance actions in this category: Spur horse, Slow/Stop horse, Whistle for horse, Balance on a wild horse (Breaking it), Save horse, Match companions speed on horse, Drive wagon (Similar actions than with horse riding)

Obtaining Buildings and Managing Them on a Strategic Level

Purchase/rent properties/buildings: 2

Single instance actions in this category: Place a building, Move a building, Upgrade a building (and open up new things to build etc.), Start Gold Rush or Cattle event, Send train (with ore)

User Interface Related Nondiegetic Actions (in Context)

Single instance actions in this category: Activate view cone of enemy, Watch replay of fight