CLASSICAL STYLES: A COMPARISON OF CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA AND MODERN AAA VIDEO GAMES

Alessia Ianni-Palarchio, Fabrizio Matarese, Mauro Mola, Brando Ratti

1. Introduction

The classical style of Hollywood films as discussed by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* situates Hollywood cinema as a distinct phenomenon, with consistency across its style that emerged alongside the mode of production (xvi – xviii). This concept of the *classical,* referring at times to an "ideal form of expression" (Bazin 29), is not reserved for the medium of film: it has been applied to dance, such as classical ballet, to music, in the way of classical music, and continues to be applied to various artforms. This raised the question: is there a classical style of video game? If so, what would this classical style look like, and how would its mode of production have influenced the paradigm?

In the pursuit of investigating these questions to attempt to define a classical style of video game, we compare the classical style of Hollywood cinema as discussed by Bordwell, Steiger, and Thompson, to video games. Although Bordwell argues that the classical Hollywood cinema style is not connected to a fixed historical period (Bordwell et al. 2), his analysis focuses on cinematic production between the 1920s and the 1960s, making it impossible to establish a chronological parallel with the younger medium of video games. In deciding which video games to instead apply Bordwell's methodology to, we considered that in previous scholarly works the word classic had previously been discussed by Eddy in *Classic Video Games: The Golden Age* to examine the period between the 1970s and 1980s. Another consideration was that the first historical period for video games with a potential for comparisons to " Classical Hollywood Style " could be the "Golden Age of Video Games," which, according to journalist Steven L. Kent, spans from 1978 to 1983 (Kent 148) and includes titles such as *Battlezone, Space Invaders, Pac-Man,* and others (143). However, applying Bordwell's methodology to video games produced during this period would have been overly forced, as many elements defining the "Classical Hollywood" style are absent from these games; for example, the emphasis on the presentation and psychological aspects of characters (Bordwell 12), is a narrative element that can be found in a video game like *L.A. Noire* (Carbone), but is absent from *Space Invaders,* which has a more limited narrative scope.

According to Italian writer Italo Calvino, "classics" exert a particular influence both when they establish themselves as unforgettable works and when they become part of collective memory, regardless of the era in which they were created (Calvino 30). This idea

of a quality of being "timeless" influenced our focus to shift from a purely chronological framework to a more qualitative one. Thus, in contrast to Eddy's and Kent's writings, we instead decided to investigate the production methods of the company Rockstar Games, and their body of work, as an exemplar of games to explore an alternative view of the concept of a classical video game. More specifically, the majority of our analysis is on a corpus of video games produced by Rockstar Games from 2000 to 2013. Titles such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series managed to dominate the global market and collective imagination (Wright), breaking the molds of past productions in terms of narrative, textual, and production frameworks. This choice also aligns with a well-defined period in video game history: the sixth and the seventh generation of consoles. Spanning from 1998 to 2013, this era marked a watershed between old and new generations of video games (Wardyga 243). It signaled the decline of SEGA-branded consoles, the introduction of new systems such as Microsoft's Xbox, the adoption of DVDs as a new storage medium, improved graphical fidelity, and greater accessibility of video games, which during this phase became more economically attainable (Wardyga 248).

We discuss how the term classical can be applied to high-budget, triple-A video game productions that redefined the norms of action-adventure games. We also consider how the production methods used by studios compare when analyzing both the development of video games in a large, triple-A game studio alongside Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's discussion of classical Hollywood cinema studios. Lastly, we discuss how certain stylistic conventions that emerge from the mode of production in triple-A video game studios converge with the norms of classical Hollywood cinema. Our analysis focuses on the areas of storytelling, music and audio, and advertising, and demonstrates how the framework established by Bordwell for the study of classic Hollywood cinema provides an additional perspective, and is a useful tool through which we can study other forms of media and popular culture, such as video games.

2. Studio Characteristics between Classical Hollywood Cinema and AAA Video Games

Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's theory discusses how entwined the style of Hollywood cinema is with its mode of production, which they describe as being "reciprocal and mutually influencing" (xvii). They make the distinction that 'mode' and 'industry' are not synonymous terms. Staiger states that 'mode' is referring to production practice, while 'industry' is referring to "the economic structure and conduct of the particular companies that produced, distributed, and exhibited the films" (91). This comparative analysis will utilize these definitions of 'mode' and 'industry' in the analysis of the video game development. We argue that the reciprocity and influence of style and production on one another (Bordwell et al. xvii) is also applicable to games. While we specifically investigate the correlation between triple-A game production and Hollywood cinema, to understand the limited scope of this research,

it is necessary to understand the delineations between the scales of game production and why the triple-A studio is most comparable with the classical Hollywood cinema studio.

2.1. A Correlation in Scale of Production

The field of video game development is composed of varying modes of production at different scales. For this particular analysis, the major focus is the structure of the triple-A, often written as AAA, game studio. Before discussing how AAA video game production parallels the mode of production in Hollywood cinema and why it is the focus of our research it is important to unpack how game studio terminology, like AAA, fits into the broader discussion of categorizations of video games and the developers who make them. The term 'triple-A' exists within a broader category of classifications to indicate the types of games a studio produces. Some of these classifications include indie, triple-I, double-A, triple-A, and quadruple-A: these may be written as indie, III, AA, AAA, and AAAA respectively (Alva). Alva writes that "[f]actors like budgets, the size of the team, and the willingness to take risks have a lot to do with how a game feels, plays, and looks. Games are often classified into categories like indie and AAA as shorthand in response to some of these factors" in discussing what differentiates each classification. Independently produced indie games are considered to have had lower financial and human resources behind them, while the highest budget, highest human-resources developments are considered AAAA games (Livingston). The line between games that fit these shorthands and the studios can often be a point of muddled contention (Lipkin 9), especially when discussing indie games (Livingston).

Ruffino points out that indie games lack a solid agreed upon definition (107), while Lipkin states that "[i]n some ways, defining 'AAA' or 'mainstream' depends on the contrast between whatever it is and whatever 'indie' is" (9). One recent such game that exemplifies the dilemma of using these categorizations in perceived independent aesthetic versus the production of the game can be seen in the video game *DAVE THE DIVER*. While the director of the game has stated that he personally would not call *DAVE THE DIVER* an indie video game, there have been arguments that the game has 'indie vibes' (Livingston), and it was even included in The Game Awards event under the independent category of games (Pureza). There is a sort of collective consciousness about how AAA games are in an aesthetic manner. A similar misconception about classical Hollywood cinema closely parallels this: Bordwell states that "in spite of the many claims that Hollywood has an aesthetic of realism, filmmakers would always sacrifice realism if this was necessary for a clearer understanding of the story" (324), and this holds true of AAA games. D'Amato exemplifies this in pointing out that despite *DAVE THE DIVER's* departure from what has become an expected AAA aesthetic, MINTROCKET is still owned by the much larger powerhouse company Nexon (Obedkov; D'Amato). It is not aesthetics that form the sole basis of determining what studios fit the AAA form, nor can aesthetics alone be the determining factor to analyze AAA.

Ruffino suggests that "we could welcome them as different approaches to the production and distribution of a video game" (119) in reference to the production of independent

games (119). We have decided to base our understanding of AAA on production scale while discussing the influence of modes of production. With this sentiment on alternative, non-mainstream production modes present in the conversation of indie games (Lipkin 11) for a multiplicity of motivations (Lipkin 12), there was less common ground with the paradigm of Hollywood cinema for analysis, as indie games are more comparable to indie film production (Lipkin 11, 12, 21). With this precedent for film and games comparison historically set under an alternative lens, and keeping in mind this conflict between aesthetics and scale, we can look to studios that are widely regarded as AAA studios, as well the broad portfolio of the games they produce. This includes subsidiaries of Rockstar Games, like Rockstar North (Mason), and studios that are able to support the cost of making video games at a AAA scale, such as Activision Blizzard, Ubisoft, Square Enix, and Warner Bros. Games, which have the funding and size to be classified as AAA (Alva). The similarity between Hollywood film and AAA games in having these larger production scales in people power and economic power made AAA the best candidate for examining a potential classical style of video games.

2.2. Organization in Specialization

AAA video game development companies do not contain homogenous skill sets between individuals. From a company's hiring information we can begin to extrapolate the internal structure of their studios based on the current hiring categories listed as an extension of the teams and roles which make up the studios internally. In video game development, it is not uncommon for companies to be divided internally into subsidiary studios that often deal with different projects: the publisher Rockstar Games is both a development and distribution house with studios such as Rockstar Dundee, Rockstar Toronto, and Rockstar North, among others (Mason): these studios all develop under the Rockstar Games umbrella, and we can infer that the resources discussed below are spread across all of their subsidiaries. When viewing Rockstar Games' current career listing page on their website they list their currently available job roles by department, which include various job categories; these include categories like animation, art, audio, code, game design and scripting, IT, marketing, research, and writing (Rockstar Games). This split of responsibilities and job descriptions is not unique to Rockstar Games and its subsidiaries.

Comparatively, the developer and publisher Ubisoft has structured their job listings similarly. While the exact wording varies between both companies' job listings, the categories are structured similarly between Rockstar Games and Ubisoft: both have departments for game design, IT, and audio among other comparable categories ("Design & Creative Direction."; Rockstar Games). This division of labor can also be seen in the credits of video games, just as in film credits, though game credits are not always reliable references, as not all individuals who work on a game may be credited by name (Yarwood; Valentine).

Each of these companies shares overlap in groupings of specialists in different areas of production. While cinema utilized specialists in the manner of "scene design, photography, lighting, and location" (Bordwell et al. 212) among others, the necessity for specialists is

shared between Hollywood cinema and AAA game production disciplines. This requirement for individuals to specialize is a result of the scale of the production; just as no one individual could know and do every task required on a film set (Bordwell et al. 212), the same can be applied to the large scale productions of AAA studios.

Studios that develop independent games are less rigid in their structure. With smaller team sizes, this level of specialization is less prominent. Unlike the structural similarities AAA studios have with the production specialization seen in Hollywood cinema, indie games do not have the same number of human resources to require, or even allow for, this level of specialization. Team sizes can be as small as in the single and double digits (Ruffino 107). The independent designer is less of a specialist, and may instead be viewed as a "lonely genius" (Ruffino 118), especially in regard to solo developers. The scale of production is drastically smaller and holds less in common with classical Hollywood film studios: this in turn influences the games produced differently than the work accomplished through large scale collaboration. This has no implicit bearing on the quality of work produced purely based on scale and specialization, but the mode of production is dissimilar enough between indie games and Hollywood cinema up to the 1960s that we focused only on further analysis of AAA games for the bearing of the classic title.

Keeping both human and financial resources in mind, as well as the scale and scope of work produced, Rockstar Games and its subsidiaries are structured in a way that allows for more direct comparisons to be drawn between their portfolio of games work and cinema. Beyond sharing specialization as a common feature of production, some areas of production overlap between the two mediums in structure and function. To determine their proximity, we narrowed down the specialties and function to compare aesthetic and production mode together, and discuss narrative, audio, and advertisements in subsequent sections.

3. GTA V's *Narrative Through the Lens of Classic Hollywood Cinema*

The progressive convergence of films and video games at a formal and production level has led to a growing need for interdisciplinary research capable of connecting the two fields. While the video game medium is multifaceted, video games have increasingly incorporated formal devices developed by cinema; at the same time, many films of the last decades produce aesthetic effects comparable to those of AAA video games, both which are influenced by technological advancements (Fassone). *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* provides a valuable framework for understanding the narration and modes of production of classical cinema, which can be applied to other narrative forms, including video games.

Starting from the fundamental elements that constitute the narrative modes of classical Hollywood cinema, we used them to investigate how the video game industry has incorporated these elements in AAA video games using *Grand Theft Auto V*, referred to as *GTA V*, as our case study.

The choice of this game derives from a few main motivations: first, it was developed by Rockstar North which, as mentioned prior, is a studio with comparable economic and human resources to the Hollywood cinema studios Bordwell et al. discuss: more than a thousand people participated in the development of the title ("Inside Rockstar North – Part 2: The Studio") and estimates of the overall cost of the title (considering development and marketing) are around 265 million dollars (Villapaz). The economic-production component of the title is comparable to that of a blockbuster movie.

Regarding its gameplay, *GTA V* fits into, and enriches, an established formula of open-world, criminal-themed action-adventure games that the *Grand Theft Auto* saga largely contributed to creating.

3.1. The Narrative Device of Classical Cinema in a Blockbuster Video Game

In this section, we analyze Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's discussion of the classical Hollywood narrative style while applying it to the video game *GTA V*.

Cinema and video games share similarities both at the linguistic-formal level, and at the economic-productive level: Bordwell et al's reflections provide a framework to analyze the nature of the relationship between these two fields.

Beginning with an investigation of the narrative style of *GTA V*, we started from the fundamental elements of classical Hollywood narrative codified by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson: compositionally motivated narrative, linear causality model with multiple intertwined lines of action, clear representation of information, centrality of the psychological character, a goal-oriented protagonist, and the presence of the obstacle as a driving force for the development of the plot (Bordwell et al. 265-275). In the continuation of the text we will focus on an analysis of the narrator.

3.2. The Narrator

Bordwell et al. cite *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Sternberg), to understand classical Hollywood narrative through the analysis of the following three axes: *self-consciousness*, *knowledgeable* and *communicative* (Bordwell et al. 24). The first axis indicates how much the narrator is conscious of presenting information to an audience, the second how much information is knowable by the narrator, and the third how much the narrator is willing to share their knowledge.

Hollywood narration is potentially omniscient, but manages this abundance of information more or less generously depending on the sequences of the film. The narrative style of *GTA V* takes up, and implements, some of the stylistic characteristics of classical cinema narrative modes. We explore some characteristics of the implicit narrator of *GTA V:* we refer to these characteristics as the 'pseudo-omniscient narrator'.

3.2.1. The Pseudo Omniscient Narrator
In *GTA V* the narrator manifests their omniscience in a measured way, as the narrator is subject to the action of the player. *GTA V* is the first game in the *Grand Theft Auto* saga

to have three playable characters integrated as a basic gameplay feature. All three of these characters have a complex psychology, different temperaments and desires, and come from specific and distinct social backgrounds: all characteristics in line with the model of the psychological character that emerged in conjunction with classical Hollywood narrative (Bordwell et al. 269).

After progressing through the initial stages of the game and unlocking at least two of the three playable characters, the player can press a button to switch characters at almost any time during the game. When this happens, there is a montage break and the camera view switches from the third-person view behind the character to a bird's-eye view similar to that produced by satellites. This bird's eye view is centered vertically on the head of the controlled character. Subsequently, there are three zoom shots back to widen the field of view, and then it switches to the newly selected character's position with the same sequence of shots from above, only this time moving towards the character instead of away. This gameplay feature indicates a level of omniscient storytelling governed by:

1) the formal limitations imposed by the developers – one cannot take control of a bird for example and fly freely through the streets of Los Santos, the fantastical re-creation of the city of Los Angeles in California, and;

2) by the choice of the player who, within the formal limitations imposed by the developers, can make a certain selection to vary and expand the narrative focus.

This game mechanic generates possibilities for multiple narrative configurations, and gives the player the ability to make editing choices within the game's sequences by changing the player's point of view and framing on the fly.

In *GTA V* the point of view can change dynamically by focusing on one of the three main characters, this possibility is not common in games that we have identified as belonging to the classic period of video games. However, it represents a natural development of the characteristics found in the narrative of classic Hollywood cinema that the video game industry has reformulated through the ludic media. Narration with multiple lines of action, clear representation of key information, the psychological character as the focus of narrative: all of these narrative characteristics identified by Bordwell et al. in Hollywood cinema remain preponderant in *GTA V* and we can also find them in many video games of the 2000s that we can consider classics.

4. The Role of Music as a Source of Identification: From Classical Hollywood Cinema to the AAA Video Game

For the film historian, the non-diegetic music used in the classical film style is the central element through which different scenes are connected together, or emotional moments of the film and characteristic aspects of characters are highlighted (Bordwell et al. 32). Bordwell also states the musical element must lead the audience into the narration (32). This decision enabled the non-diegetic music to become a significant element of the narrative,

without overwhelming the filmic text. One of the elements identified as significant within classical Hollywood cinema is the use of the leitmotif (Bordwell et al. 33).

Early Hollywood film production took Richard Wagner as a general model for the creation of the various film soundtracks, and Bordwell offers the following explanation for this decision: Wagner was a perfect model, since he exploited the narrational possibilities of music (33). Harmony, rhythm, and a continuous melody could correspond to the play's dramatic action, and leitmotifs could convey a character's thoughts, draw parallels between situations, even anticipate action, or create irony (Bordwell et al. 33), and was particularly well-suited for representing characters, locations, moments, or psychological states. The use of the leitmotif enabled the association of a specific melody with a character or a precise moment in the narrative, facilitating the spectator's identification with the depicted story. This is one of the points of contact between the classic Hollywood film production and the production of AAA video games of the early 2000s.

The juxtaposition between Rockstar Games and the classical Hollywood film industry can be seen in comparing the use and production of leitmotifs in films with the use of music in the Grand Theft Auto video game series, focusing on the game's radio stations through which the player can select the songs they prefer.

Music was a founding element of Rockstar Games even before the birth of the company itself (Peel), and retains a key role in the brand identity of Rockstar Game's productions. One of the brand's principal strengths has consistently been its aspiration to encapsulate the multifaceted nature of American society and history, encompassing its inherent contradictions and stereotypes (Wright 15). In order to facilitate such a narrative, in a manner analogous to classical Hollywood cinema, the musical element assumes great significance.

It is evident that, even within the context of video games, the musical element cannot be regarded as purely decorative. Instead, it must be considered as an integral component of the narrative and world of the video game itself. A study conducted in 2010 by Tan, Baxa, and Spackman demonstrated that music and game sounds, when incorporated into gameplay, enhance a player's performance during the gaming session, as opposed to a gaming experience without such auditory elements. A review of this study reveals that non-diegetic music and sounds are deeply intertwined with and beneficial to the audience, even in the context of video games (Tan et al.). Performativity is not the sole objective of the soundtrack in video games, and as previously stated, the music should assist the players in identifying with the narrative, emphasizing its pivotal elements or accentuating the characteristics of characters and cultural contexts. Furthermore, if a brand wishes to maintain its reputation as a 'bad boy of the game industry' (Zakariasson and Dymek 56), the choice of soundtrack will also be of significant importance.

This is particularly true when the narrative of most of the titles produced deals with themes such as crime, lawlessness, and social violence (Osborne). In contrast to the Hollywood leitmotif, however, the music present since *GTA III* is not a non-diegetic medium used. By adhering to the active narrative of the video game text, the music becomes an active diegetic element through which the individual player can manifest their own emotional state, or

their character's. The player is able to choose songs featured on radio stations according to their mood or individual approach to the game narrative at a specific moment in time: this creates an additional layer of complexity through which the player can identify more with the imagery proposed by the game and customize their avatar (Miller).

The inaugural utilization of tracks from external artists occurred with the advent of *GTA III*, wherein tracks created expressly for the game by select music producers were accompanied by pre-existing tracks from artists with varying degrees of recognition. In addition to supporting the narrative of the game, Rockstar Games is able to establish a portion of its marketing campaign based on the music itself (Wright). This decision proved to be an appropriate one from the outset, as evidenced by the fact that, upon the release of *GTA: Vice City*, there were over 100 licensed songs in the game, including from artists such as Ozzy Osbourne, Iron Maiden, Blondie and Run-D.M.C ("Vice City Tourist Guide" 18-21). Similarly to the musical production of the classic Hollywood film, in which the various musicians reproduced, reinterpreted or composed from scratch the various leit-motifs, within a few years, Rockstar began to commission the supervision of the various radio channels to prominent figures from all the music scenes deemed 'underground' and suitable for the narrative.

An example could include the supervision, and hosting, of the *Liberty City Hardcore* radio station in *GTA IV*, by Jimmy Gestapo, the frontman of the historic New York Hardcore band Murphy's Law (Fischer et al.). The curatorial involvement of musicians, or influential figures within a specific musical scene, contributes to making the product feel more authentic, and more aligned with the narrative: in the production of classic video games, it is now possible to ask Iggy Pop to curate the selection of tracks that will be broadcast on *Liberty Rock Radio* (Liebe).

The utilization of music in the *GTA* series is analogous to that employed in Hollywood cinema, and these similarities extend beyond the narrative aspect to encompass production, and historical aspects as well. With a few exceptions, the focus of various classical Hollywood film soundtracks was on pieces that were inspired by and reproduced the sound of mid-19th century romantic music (Bordwell et al. 33). The advent of 'New Hollywood', or 'post-classical' cinema, marked a change in the composition of soundtracks, which began to feature contemporary pieces, often already known to the general public (Bordwell et al. 608-09). An example of this is *Easy Rider*, the precursor film of this new cinematic style. Although the first three volumes of *GTA* mainly include unreleased songs, created expressly for the game and arranged by Craig Conner, who was Rockstar North's musical director from 1995 to 2014 (Miller), the approach to music taken from the modern AAA video game seems to be different from that of classical Hollywood cinema, and therefore more similar to that of New Hollywood.

The style of the songs in *GTA* rearranges and adapts music and melodies from the past to the present, similar to classical Hollywood cinema. An exemplar of this phenomenon is the utilization of select compositions from the *Scarface* soundtrack on the 'Flashback 95.6' radio station that evocatively conjure the underworld imagery of the 1980s (Miller). It is

only with the advent of *GTA: Vice City*, following a music-driven marketing campaign, that the *GTA* radio stations began to feature a far greater number of widely known tracks, rather than those created specifically for the video game.

Despite the numerous differences, primarily stemming from the substantial heterogeneity between film and video games, the use of music throughout various periods of Hollywood cinema Bordwell describes appears to share certain affinities with that of AAA video games. Initially conceived as a simple, yet powerful, narrative aid, the musical element evolves over time, becoming a fundamental and almost autonomous feature of the production itself.

5. Standardization and Differentiation: Analysis and Comparison Between Bordwell's Theory on Advertising Practices in Classical Hollywood Cinema and Rockstar Game's Productions

To expand the discussion to the advertising methods and how Rockstar Games acts in the post-production phase of their work, we reference chapter nine of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* as the definitions of standardization and differentiation play a key role both regarding the production processes and the advertising methods of a product.

Standardization refers to the set of "repetition of characteristics considered desirable in the film" (Bordwell et al. 96). It also includes the structure of Hollywood productions: "ranging from stylistics practices (...) to technology (...) to business, production, and exhibition practices" (97). It is then possible to focus on the characteristics that make a product recognizable and appreciable, like all those rules and "norms" that the audience knows to expect in a product of a specific company.

On the other hand, differentiation bases its advertising on something that makes a specific movie different and unique. Taking into analysis four examples of classical Hollywood film advertisements that are cited by Bordwell, there are four types of specific cases: from the feelings related to the audience experience to the technical innovations about fading (98); from comparison in absolute terms like considering *The Great Train Robbery* "the superior of any moving picture film ever made" (98), to the search for realism through new technologies as the Edison's Projectoscope (100).

Since the days of the first generations of consoles, with the birth of the genres and their specific characteristics (Cook), players and critics have argued on the dualism between what is standardized and what is new (Arsenault) in terms of gameplay, design, and experience. Regarding software and specifically the video games sector under consideration, every specific video game has technical and visual norms from which it is difficult to move away (like the interface in a first person shooter or the skill tree in an RPG); but at the same time, the player is always looking for technical or technological novelties that can support a new and engaging experience. Focusing on the worlds created by Rockstar Games, this case study will analyze how the advertising behind three specific products worked in the years: the *Red Dead* (Rockstar Games) series, and the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Every Rockstar Games

production has a strong connection with cinema in terms of both its inspiration and references. The relationship with cinema, as previously discussed, touches on several points of connection: from genre clichés, settings, visual and narrative tributes to Hollywood cinema, the way cutscenes are enjoyed, and the possibility to drive a car with different cameras and fast cutting during gameplay that "mimics a film car chase" (Chesher).

This section will analyze the terms and ways in which the *Red Dead* series, and the *Grand Theft Auto* series have been presented to the public; with what criteria of standardization and differentiation they have been described and how they are related to the four types of reviews identified in Bordwell's work. Rockstar Games has created over the years games that have a lot of things in common: genre, style, mechanics, typology of missions, and the open world structure. The *Grand Theft Auto* saga, especially from the third chapter onwards, has become the yardstick for any other third person adventure video game in the manner of gameplay. Typically rockstar games have a strong connection to the North American area and to a specific historical period: according to Wright, Rockstar Games wants to tell players "all over the world what an authentic, Rockstar-authored history of America looks like" (30): starting chronologically from the far-west imagery, to post-World War II, to contemporary society. As Wright continues "their games are self-consciously historiographical. Branded as 'satire' or 'cultural history', they reflect wider historical knowledge and sell it back to a globalized audience. Moreover, their promotional discourses are equally as deliberately historiographical" (217).

The standardization of the technical aspect of the game and the way the player interacts with the digital world is well present in the productions of the U.S. studio. For example , the structure of both the *GTA* and *Red Dead* sagas is almost identical: third-person action-adventures set in open world maps with similarly structured main and optional missions and a default user interface and controls with the same features. Although many media outlets at the release of the first episode tried to intertwine the two games, Cantamessa – writer of Red Dead Redemption –stated that the games' intentions, though visually comparable, were totally different: *"Our ambition certainly wasn't to make GTA with horses (…) Our target was to contribute something to the canon, without being a movie and without being a book"* (Sirio).

The way Rockstar Games talks about its products is specific to each game it produces: different advertisements have been used, and are still being used, for specific games, focusing on unique features of the game.

In the area of advertisement, one can attempt to apply the same Bordwellian pattern analyzed earlier to some of the statements made at video game releases. The following are some quotes regarding specific Rockstar Games' productions that may fall under the four cases highlighted above about: user experience, technical innovations, comparison in absolute terms and searching for realism.

5.1.1 Case Studies

Rockstar Games co-founder Dan Houser presented Red Dead Redemption as "not just a kind of classic cowboy experience, but it's a classic cowboy experience as that classic cowboy era is dying out" in an interview about the user experience (Onyett). This type of communication is intended to give an accurate, and faithful description of a specific slice of life. In *Life of an American Fireman* the viewers create a relationship with the characters and to follow their evolution, in this case the player plays the role of a specific character and conducts him toward his personal story in the game world: the old west. Thanks to the avowed film references that have made the narrative, world building, design and characterization of the characters unique, the player knows they will have a complete western experience

In this second case, the main focus is adding a new mechanic into an established series. There is a statement from Rockstar North's art director Aaron Garbut in which he says that "[having] multiple characters was a leap of faith. It was an interesting idea, and it felt like we could do interesting things with it, but it also felt like a change to the core of the game that might backfire" (O'Brien).

While Bordwell discusses how advertising communicates with the viewer about technical innovation such as new film transitions, in Rockstar's interview the main focus is on the mechanics: can a new mechanic be considered as an innovation in the same manner? As new film transitions would impact the experience of the viewer in classic cinema, the player is now set to play the game in a new way when given a new mechanic. In this example, that mechanic is using different characters inside the same universe for the first time in the series. The new mechanic brings to the player a novel experience which is more closely related to cinema as referenced in *3.2.1. The Pseudo omniscient narrator.*

The third case is important because the statement comes from 2001, during the PlayStation 2 era: this was one of the most important consoles ever in terms of innovation (Zawislak). Leslie Benzies during an interview reflected on the importance of *GTA III* to the genre it created: "Grand Theft Auto 3 is going to be more influential than ever, but above all it's going to be fun. (IGN Staff)

Unlike as discussed by Bordwell et al. we are not living in an era in which movie studios could venture to announce that a particular film would be the best ever (98). In the video game world, and also for film, doing this today is very rare.

GTA III was one game which made an important step forward from the previous installations in the series in gameplay, realism, experience and in-game options. And despite the fact that it was not described as the best game ever, in absolute terms it can be confirmed that *GTA III* was "more influential than ever" for the evolution of third person action games as they are known today.

The last case is focused on realism. Regarding new technologies used for *Red Dead Redemption 2*, John Bass declared that their biggest goal was "making the player forget they are playing a game, and instead leaving them with a memory of a place" (Shanley). Edison's projectoscope was able to give life to pictures, and make them look as if they were real. In another way, Rockstar's games allow players to play and navigate in a game world

increasingly similar to the real world. This is thanks to the innovative latest generation of hardware and technologies. In this case the environment – like pictures at the end of the nineteenth century, has been made real.

Although the examples examined are a small number, it is interesting to note that there is a similarity in the two media. Society's usage and methods of advertising have changed over the decades, a deeper study of this area can make the connection between film and video game production even stronger.

5.2. Comparable Advertising

Most of the norms that Bordwell et al. analyzed are entirely analogous with the advertising procedure that large companies, such as Rockstar Games, use in recent years. However, it is necessary to say that this refers to specific cases, regarding a small percentage of advertising methods: advertising works differently today, with avenues including social networks, guerrilla marketing, and video specials.

Times change, and today it is hard to find a game that is advertised as the best ever; at the same time it is easy to find a communication focused on something new thanks to technological progress or innovative game play and game-experience or eventually something somehow new referring to games that winks to other games from the same genre or from the same saga.

6. *Conclusion*

In this article we related stylistic features of AAA games, as well as production methods employed, focused mainly on a subset of games produced by subsidiaries of the publisher and developer Rockstar Games, to elements of classic Hollywood cinema. This comparative analysis has revealed significant and comparable aesthetic and production elements between these two media. Despite the differences in historical, economic, and cultural context between these two phenomena, we found numerous points of contact that suggest a continuity of certain production practices and stylistic elements between classic cinema and AAA video games.

To start with the similarities, both classic cinema and AAA video games require a high production budget, and a sizable workforce. Furthermore, the human capital must be highly specialized in one of the roles that make up the production process to accommodate for the large base of knowledge spread across the individuals working on these respective projects. At the narrative level, elements inherited from classic cinema, such as the pseudo-omniscient narrator, are also found, reworked, in AAA video games, incorporating elements specific to the medium that add further complexity to the narrative form. In music production, it is used in classic cinema as an expressive element, capable of communicating on an emotional level the dramatic progression of a scene, the personality of a character, or the approach of a significant event. In AAA video games, this use is maintained but some linguistic in-

novations have been introduced through the double possibility of using extradiegetic and diegetic music, as we see through the radio highlighted in the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Finally, at the level of advertising for these mediums, we have highlighted four case examples in which the same persuasive levers have been used in the presentation of classic cinema and AAA video games: user experience, technological innovations, comparison in absolute terms, and the search for realism.

None of these are an exact match – due to technological differences, the affordances of each medium, and the changing historical and media contexts – but we can draw parallels between these two forms of media in both production and how that emerges into many of their aesthetic choices. While the comparisons in this study are relevant in the narrow field of AAA video games, in particular in the productions of Rockstar Games and subsidiaries, the question remains if Rockstar Games and its subsidiaries are representative of the whole of AAA gaming, and if these parallels are sufficient enough in applying the classic label to modern gaming. There are a few gaps in this particular research.

One large consideration unexplored in this paper is the idea that the classic video game may be a style and mode of game not yet entirely established in the present day. Cinema is an older, more established medium than video games by decades ("*Video Game History*."; "A Very Short History of Cinema."), while video games are both newer ("*Video Game History*.") and have been subject to rapid change alongside the technology used both in making, disseminating, and playing it. Given another decade, or longer, what we currently consider to be modern AAA may still be considered historically classical, but just as easily may be an outlier as norms change: this is especially significant while we are only just seeing the emergence of AAAA games being developed (Alva). Another gap is considering that this is a vertical slice of research, which provides a deep but narrow insight into a series of studios that all work in similar genres under the same publishing umbrella. This research would benefit in the future from an in-depth analysis of additional studios' production-aesthetic connections which are not subsidiaries of Rockstar Games, and are additionally not published by Rockstar Games: as the publisher may potentially impose its own aesthetic norms due to their publishing requirement, this may introduce bias if all games are from the same publisher across a horizontal section of AAA games.

This study demonstrates that Bordwell's analytical frameworks offer a valuable toolset for understanding creative industries, especially those that create artifacts of popular culture, beyond the industry behind cinema. AAA Video games, such as the action-adventure games produced by Rockstar Games and its subsidiaries, appear to have a strong pervading set of both aesthetic and production norms that show consistency across the body of work. We have demonstrated on this subset of games some of the ways in which the modes of production are enmeshed with the principles of narrative structure; as well, the use of certain genre conventions, and stylistic devices are transferable across multiple forms of media. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the video game industry as a distinct yet interconnected part of the popular culture landscape. This can be extrapolated

to other AAA studios in the future to further examine how this mode of production has influenced the games they produce.

This research underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in analyzing popular culture, where media studies can inform and enrich our understanding of film, television, literature, and other creative industries. We wanted to highlight the need for scholars to explore the intersections and overlaps between seemingly disparate fields of study.

Ultimately, the most significant contribution of this study lies not in its empirical findings, but rather in its theoretical implications. By successfully applying Bordwell's analytical frameworks to a medium as distinct from cinema as video games, we demonstrate that these categories are not bound by their initial conception. Rather, they are transferable in a way that allows them to be adapted to other forms of popular culture; the value of this research lies in its potential to expand the scope of Bordwell's work, providing a framework for scholars across disciplines to analyze and interpret diverse forms of media and how similar modes of production in scope and scale influence the works.

Works Cited

"A Very Short History of Cinema." Science + Media Museum, 18 June 2020, https://www.science-andmediamuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/very-short-history-of-cinema.

Alva, Brittany. "What Makes a AAA Game a AAA Game?" *Epic Games Store*, 10 Oct. 2023, https://store.epicgames.com/en-US/news/what-makes-a-aaa-game-a-aaa-game.

Arsenault, Dominic. "Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, Oct. 2009, pp. 149–76. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6003.

Bazin, André. "The Evolution Of The Language Of Cinema". What Is Cinema? Volume I, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, pp. 23-40.

Bordwell, David, et al. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. 1st ed., Routledge, 1985.

Calvino, Italo. *Perché leggere i classici*. Mondadori, 1991.

Carbone, Marco Benoît. "L'AFFAIRE L.A. NOIRE. Comunità Critiche e Modi Di Ricezione Nei Discorsi Tra Cinema e Videogioco." *Le nuove forme della critica cinematografica. Critica e cinefilia nell'epoca del web*. Cinergie, no. 1, 2012.

Chesher, Chris. "Neither Gaze nor Glance, but Glaze: Relating to Console Game Screens." *Scan Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, Aug. 2007, http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/print.php?j_id=11&journal_id=19.

Cook, Daniel. "My Name Is Daniel and I Am a Genre Addict." *GameDev.Net*, 2011 1999, https://archive.gamedev.net/archive/reference/design/features/genreaddict/default.html.

D'Amato, Lee. "There's One Big Problem With Dave The Diver's Best Indie Nomination At TGA 2023." *ScreenRant*, 15 Nov. 2023, https://screenrant.com/dave-diver-best-indie-nomination-tga-2023-nexon/.

DAVE THE DIVER. Directed by Jaeho Hwang, produced by Daehwon Kim, MINTROCKET. 2023.

"Design & Creative Direction." *Ubisoft*, 2024, https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/company/careers/our-jobs/design-creative-direction.

Eddy, Brian R. *Classic Video Games: The Golden Age, 1971-1984*. Shire, 2012.

Fassone, Riccardo. *Cinema e videogiochi*. Carocci, 2017.

Fischer, Erik, and Bettina Schlüter. "The music of Liberty City. Zur Konvergenz realer und virtueller Musikkulturen." *Navigationen – Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaften*, vol. 9, 2009, pp. 39–51. *DOI.org (Datacite)*, https://doi.org/10.25969/MEDIAREP/2324.

French, Michael. "Inside Rockstar North – Part 2: The Studio | Develop." *Develop*, 4 Oct. 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20131004122711/http://www.develop-online.net/studio-profile/inside-rockstar-north-part-2-the-studio/0184061.

Grand Theft Auto. Directed by Keith R. Hamilton, Produced by David Jones, DMA Design / Rockstar Games. 1997.

Grand Theft Auto II. Directed by Jim Woods, David Jones, and Simon Crisp, DMA Design / Rockstar Games. 1999.

Grand Theft Auto III. Produced by Leslie Benzies, DMA Design / Rockstar Games. 2001.

Grand Theft Auto IV. Produced by Leslie Benzies, Rockstar North / Rockstar Games. 2008.

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. Produced by Leslie Benzies, Rockstar North / Rockstar Games. 2004.

Grand Theft Auto V. Produced by Leslie Benzies, Rockstar North / Rockstar Games. 2013.

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. Produced by Leslie Benzies, Rockstar North / Rockstar Games. 2002.

Hopper, Dennis. *Easy Rider*. Directed by Dennis Hopper. Columbia Pictures, 1969

IGN Staff. "Grand Theft Auto 3: Interview with DMA." *IGN*, 21 May 2012, https://www.ign.com/articles/2001/02/23/grand-theft-auto-3-interview-with-dma.

Kent, Steven. *The ultimate history of video games: from Pong to Pokémon and beyond : the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. Three Rivers Press, 2001.

Liebe, Michael. "Interactivity and Music in Computer Games" in: *Music and Game. Musik und Medien*. Springer 2013 https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-18913-0_2.

Lipkin, Nadav. "Examining Indie's Independence: The Meaning of 'Indie' Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Cooptation." *Loading... Vol. 7 No. 11 (2013): Special Issue: 'Indie, Eh?'*, vol. 7, no. 11, Dec. 2012, https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/122.

Livingston, Christopher. "'Is Dave The Diver an Indie Game? I Would Say No,' Says Game Director." *PC Gamer*, 22 Mar. 2024. *www.pcgamer.com*, https://www.pcgamer.com/games/adventure/is-dave-the-diver-an-indie-game-i-would-say-no-says-game-director/.

Mason, Paul. "All the Rockstar Games Studios Explained." *Game Rant*, 14 Feb. 2021, https://game-rant.com/rockstar-games-studios-explained/.

Miller, Kiri. "Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in Grand Theft Auto". Ethnomusicology, 51:3, Aug. 2007, DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.2307/20174544.

Obedkov, Evgeny. "Nexon Turns Mintrocket into Its Wholly Owned Subsidiary to Strengthen Studio's 'Independent Culture.'" *Game World Observer*, 12 Sept. 2024, https://gameworldobserver.com/2024/09/12/mintrocket-subsidiary-of-nexon-independent-culture.

O'Brien, Lucy. "Rockstar: Multiple Playable GTA 5 Characters 'a Leap of Faith.'" *IGN*, 6 Jan. 2014, https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/01/06/rockstar-multiple-playable-gta-5-characters-a-leap-of-faith.

Onyett, Charles. "Red Dead Redemption: A Man and His Horse." *IGN*, 11 May 2012, https://www.ign.com/articles/2009/05/09/red-dead-redemption-a-man-and-his-horse.

Osborne, Patrick. "Evaluating the Presence of Social Strain in Rockstar Games' 'Grand Theft Auto IV.'" *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 109–32, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416353. JSTOR.

Peel, Jeremy. "Rockstar made millions selling Scotland's natural export: dark comedy". *PC Gamer*, May 17. 2021. *www.pcgamer.com*

Pureza, Gabriel Machado. "Geoff Keighley Responds to The Game Awards Dave the Diver Controversy." *Game Rant*, 28 Nov. 2023, https://gamerant.com/the-game-awards-2023-best-indie-game-dave-the-diver-controversy/.

Red Dead Redemption. Produced by Steve Martin, Josh Needleman, and David Kunkler, Rockstar San Diego / Rockstar Games. 2010.

Red Dead Redemption 2. Produced by Rob Nelson, Rockstar Games. 2018.

Ruffino, Paolo. "Narratives of Independent Production in Video Game Culture." *Loading...*, vol. 7, no. 11, 11, 2013. *journals.sfu.ca*, https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/120.

Rockstar Games. "Rockstar Games Careers." Rockstar Games, https://www.rockstargames.com/careers.

Shanley, Patrick. "Rockstar Games Reveals New Plot Details for 'Red Dead Redemption 2' (Exclusive)." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 7 Sept. 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/rockstar-reveals-plot-details-red-dead-redemption-2-1139857/.

Sirio, Paolo. "Old West Project 'Our Ambition Certainly Wasn't to Make GTA with Horses' – Red Dead Redemption Writer on Rockstar's Vision for the Game." *The Sun*, UK Edition, 4 Oct. 2022, https://www.thesun.co.uk/tech/20002917/gta-christian-cantamessa-red-dead-interview/.

Sternberg, Meir. *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978.

Tan, Siu-Lan, et al. "Effects of Built-in Audio versus Unrelated Background Music on Performance In an Adventure Role-Playing Game." IJGCMS vol.2, no.3 2010: pp.1-23. http://doi.org/10.4018/jgcms.2010070101.

Valentine, Rebekah. "Video Game Crediting Is Still a Huge Problem; But One Group of Volunteers Is Working on Solutions – IGN." *IGN*, 10 Aug. 2022, https://www.ign.com/articles/video-game-crediting-is-still-a-huge-problem-but-one-group-of-volunteers-is-working-on-solutions.

"Vice City Tourist Guide" Instruction manual. Rockstar Games. PDF. 2002. https://cdn.cloudflare.steamstatic.com/steam/apps/12110/manuals/manual_english.pdf?t=1634144465.

"Video Game History." *Smithsonian Institution*, https://www.si.edu/spotlight/the-father-of-the-video-game-the-ralph-baer-prototypes-and-electronic-games/video-game-history.

Villapaz, Luke. "'GTA 5' Is The Most Expensive Video Game Ever Produced: Report." *International Business Times*, 8 Sept. 2013, https://www.ibtimes.com/gta-5-costs-265-million-develop-market-making-it-most-expensive-video-game-ever-produced-report.

Wade, Alex. "The State of the Art: Western Modes of Videogame Production." *2007: Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference: Situated Play*, DiGRA, 2007, pp. 683–91. *ResearchGate*, https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/329/329.

Wardyga, Brian. *The Video Games Text Book: History, Business, Technology*. CRC Press, 2019.

Wright, Esther. *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity*. De Gruyter, 2022. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110716610.

Yarwood, Jack. "So, You Worked on a Video Game. You Might Not Appear in the Credits." *Washington Post*, 18 May 2021. *www.washingtonpost.com*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2021/05/18/video-game-credits-policy/.

Zakariasson, Peter, and Mikolaj Dymek. *Videogame Marketing: A Student Textbook*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2017. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315748900.

Zawislak, Paulo A., et al. "Firm's Innovation Expectation, Potential and Actions: Impressions on the Japanese Videogame Console Market." *Journal of Technology Management & Innovation*, vol. 4, no. 4, Dec. 2009. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-27242009000400006.